

12-2023

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Enhancing Recovery with the Use of Animals

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Date: November 19 , 2023

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### **Abstract**

Avenues is a program designed to help adults lead happier and more productive lives by overcoming mental health and chemical dependency challenges. The problem is, participants are not fully prepared for independent living following these programs. The plan was to provide participants a therapeutic approach to gaining hands-on experience while combating symptoms of mental illness with the use of animals, with hopes that participants would be better prepared for life after leaving the program. If the project met the expected outcome, the agency would see a lower rate of participants returning to the program and a higher success rate of employment and life management skills among participants. Lack of time, unmeasurable data, and self-discharging patients made it impossible to complete all tasks for this project to be successful. Additional time is needed to move forward and see if the project will be successful in reaching the expected outcomes.

*Keywords:* Substance abuse, recovery, therapy, animals, mental health

## Agency & Communities Served

Avenues is a mental health and substance abuse program located in Watsonville, California. The program's mission is to, “provide compassionate and effective treatment to individuals struggling with mental health and substance abuse issues and to empower individuals to build healthy relationships, and lead fulfilling lives, while achieving long-term recovery and wellness through evidence-based treatment education and support services.” (*Community Connection*, 2021).

Avenues is a small program under a larger umbrella company called Community Connection and focuses on providing a wide range of services to meet the diverse needs of its clients. These services include outpatient therapy, medication management, case management, group therapy and holistic therapies such as mindfulness meditation. The experienced and compassionate staff at Avenues mental health and substance abuse program are dedicated to providing personalized care and treatment plans that address the root cause of mental health and substance abuse issues. Avenues utilizes evidence based practices and client centered approach to ensure that clients receive the most effective and appropriate care possible. The program staff includes psychiatrist, therapist, case managers, and other mental health professionals who work collaboratively to provide personalized treatment plans. Through its commitment to excellence and compassion, Avenues is a virtual resource for the Santa Cruz community and beyond.

Avenues of Santa Cruz serves the adult population for anyone over the age of 18 years old, and who has a referral through Santa Cruz mental health services. Although there are challenges to gather accurate data for the population served, this program focuses on helping all

individuals regardless of their race, ethnicity, language, geographic distribution or socioeconomic status.

### **Problem Statement**

Despite the current substance abuse and mental health programs efforts, participants are not adequately prepared for independent living following current programs. Short term programs such as Avenues do not provide enough time to prepare participants for life after discharge. According to Psychology Today, recovery takes time because it is a process in which brain cells gradually recover the capacity to respond to natural sources of reward and restore control over the impulse to use. (2023). With programs limiting participants to a total of 90 days, including a readmission, there isn't enough time to provide participants with the hands-on skills needed to live adequately enough to obtain a sustainable income once they have completed the program. “Treatment should be tailored to address each patient's drug use patterns and drug related medical mental and social problems” (NIDA, 2023). A reason may be due to lack of comprehensive and tailored training that adequately addresses the unique needs of each participant. According to indeed, “a hands-on approach to learning provides you with techniques, tools and skills, which can help enhance your self-esteem” (2022). This can lead to improved performance and strengthens social skills.

Figure 1 presents a visual representation of the problem model, illustrating the complex factors that contribute to the issue of participants being inadequately prepared for independent living following programs.

Figure 1: Problem Model

<b>Contributing Factors</b>	<b>Problem</b>	<b>Consequences</b>
Lack of stress management skills	Participants are not prepared for independent living following programs.	Risk of Mental Health Crisis
Lack of Structure		Participants return to programs
Missing opportunity to practice skills		Can't find job Homeless/Relapse

### **Contributing Factors**

#### **[High Levels of Stress]**

Currently, Avenues provides essential addiction treatment programs that focus on stress management. The program also provides participants with effective coping mechanisms and strategies to manage their emotions and reduce risks of relapse. Yet, these programs don't focus on stress management that is specific to each participant's needs; it aims more towards a one size fits all program.. This significantly impacts the success of participants recovering from their addiction. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), “Stress is one of the most common triggers to drug use, drug relapse, and drug addiction in general” (2021). One example of stress impact is chronic stress, which can alter brain chemistry and increase the likelihood of addiction. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), “Stressful experiences can cause changes in the brain that may contribute to addiction” (APA, 2018). Stress management is a crucial aspect of addiction treatment, as individuals in recovery may face a range of stressful situations that can trigger the desire to use drugs or alcohol.

**[Lack of structure]**

While participants of Avenues live at Casa Pacific, they are provided with daily schedules typically structured and carefully designed to promote a healthy and sober lifestyle for them. The daily schedules often include a range of activities, such as group therapy sessions, individual counseling, and other recreational activities. Additionally, schedules may include designated times for meal preparation and consumption, as well as adequate time for rest and relaxation.

A relapse is less likely to occur if a person follows their treatment plan, has structure, and a support system. Relapse is not a moral failing, but rather a sign of a person's treatment plan that is not fully compatible with a successful recovery for their specific needs. For example, their relapse plan does not address their underlying triggers that drove their addiction. There is not one specific treatment plan that is right for everyone and many treatment plans require modification. (Walker, 2023)

By providing participants with a structured daily routine, the participants can live in house addiction programs that aim to produce this sense of stability, routine, and accountability. This type of program can help individuals successfully recover from addiction. This can also help individuals stay focused and motivated, reduce feelings of stress and anxiety, and increase their sense of purpose and self esteem. Ultimately, the goal of the program is to help reduce the risk of relapse. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), "Individuals who have structure and meaning in their lives are less likely to use drugs and alcohol" (2017). The problem with this is it's only for the three months while participants live at Casa Pacific and schedules are unrealistic. The current schedules are repetitive leaving little room for regular activities, such as work, exercise and socialization.

### **[Missing opportunities to practice skills]**

Although short term programs provide participants with experiences of volunteering at places such as food banks and working on the farm, there is limited opportunity to practice other life skills. Realistically, most participants are in the beginning stages of recovery and have little interest in jumping into the workforce

Behavioral therapies help people in drug addiction treatments modify their attitudes and behaviors related to drug use. As a result, patients are able to handle stressful situations and various triggers that might cause another relapse. Behavioral therapies can also enhance the effectiveness of medications and help people remain in treatment longer. (NIDA, 2023)

Attending daily group rehab sessions is a requirement to reside at a recovery home. The program teaches general information about symptom management, coping skills, art therapy and mindfulness journaling, yet participants are not being faced with real case scenarios. Effective hands-on skills are most useful when the skills being learned are engaging and well accepted by the participant. “Because addiction can affect so many aspects of a person's life, treatment should address the needs of the whole person to be successful.” (NIDA, 2023). Most participants have also been dealing with addiction for a while, therefore they may need more time to practice living without their addiction. The average time it takes an addict to recover can vary depending on a variety of factors, such as the type of severity of addiction, the individual's level of motivation and support, and the effectiveness of treatment.

### **Consequences**

The consequences of this training can be severe, including a diminished sense of self efficacy, limited employment opportunities, and dependence on others for support. To address



this issue, it is important to identify the specific factors that contribute to this problem, such as inadequate training or insufficient resources. Once these factors have been identified, targeted interventions can be developed to ensure that the program participants are adequately prepared for independent living.

### **[Risk of mental health crisis]**

Stress is a common trigger for relapse in individuals who are in recovery or addiction. Without effective stress management strategies, individuals may feel overwhelmed and turned to substance use as a way to cope with their emotions. Stress can also lead to negative thoughts and patterns, and increase the risk of anxiety and depression, which can further contribute to the desire to use drugs or alcohol. In addition, chronic stress can have negative physical effects on the body. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), “Stress can contribute to development of chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes” (2021). Bad physical health can contribute to worsening mental health issues.

When individuals do not have healthy coping mechanisms for managing stress, they may turn to drugs or alcohol as a way to escape or numb their feelings. Additionally, there are many factors that contribute to a higher risk for mental health problems. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), “Mental disorders are caused by a complex interplay of genetic biological personality and environmental factors” (2021). This can lead to a vicious cycle where substance use may temporarily alleviate stress but ultimately increase the problem and create new stressors in the individual's life.

### **[Participants struggle with employment]**

Missed employment opportunities can make it difficult for participants to obtain and maintain steady employment. Avenues current programs do not make client participation

mandatory during training sessions or classes, which contributes to clients missing opportunities to practice skills. Volunteering in the community allows individuals to enjoy the interest and acquire practical skills that can enhance their community involvement readiness. However, volunteering is only encouraged, it is not an obligation. “Drawing on Bandura’s social learning theory, skills are learnt through interaction, processing and structuring of experiences” (Aparna & Raakhee, 2011; Prajapati et al., 2017). Avenues is committed to creating a supportive and free environment where participants can explore ways of reconnecting to the community at their own pace. The goal is to offer guidance and resources as encouragement to ensure hands-on learning. This goal is enriching and enjoyable rather than a source of stress. “Therefore, life skills are designed to be taught through experiential learning such as role play, modeling and practice” (Nasheeda et al., 2019). Avenues current program structure is conflicting with its primary goal of helping individuals by aiding in the unwillingness for participants to try.

### **[Participants return to programs]**

Programs of rehabilitation or educational programs aim to equip participants with the necessary skills to lead independent lives while rehabilitation programs are in progress. However, despite these program's objectives, many participants result in continuing to struggle to achieve independence following their participation in these programs. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), “Unstructured time and boredom can be risk factors of substance use” (2021). Again, because of lack of structure in an individual's life can increase the risk of relapse, particularly for those in recovery from addiction. Without a routine or schedule, individuals may feel bored, aimless, or uncertain about how to fill their time. This can lead to feelings of anxiety, depression, and loneliness, which can increase the risk of turning to drugs or alcohol as a way to cope. “Statistics indicate that anywhere from 40 to 60% of people with

addiction will experience a relapse” (*Hazelden Betty Ford*, 2021). A lack of structure can also lead to poor sleep habits, which can further exacerbate these feelings and increase the risk of relapse.

### **Project Description**

#### **Title: Enhancing Recovery with the Use of Animals**

The purpose of this project is to bring together mental health, substance abuse, and animal rescue programs; in effort to collaboratively help clients build necessary life skills in order to better prepare participants for independent living following completion of the programs. After reaching out to other agencies in the community and establishing a set volunteer schedule, Avenues participants will be given the opportunity to volunteer at animal rescue centers. During this period, the participants will actively practice hands-on skills such as feeding, bathing, walking and playing with an animal in need. By partnering with animal rescues, recovering homes can contribute to their local communities and promote positive change. Overall, partnering with animal rescues can provide numerous benefits for recovery homes and their residents.

#### **Project Justification & Benefits**

People in recovery can benefit greatly from working with animals in a variety of ways. Animals provide a sense of companionship and unconditional love that can help feelings of loneliness and isolation. Working with animals has been shown to reduce stress and anxiety levels, which can be particularly helpful for those recovering from addiction. Animals can also help provide a sense of purpose and responsibility, as caring for them requires daily commitment and attention. According to a study which involved the use of canines for psychotherapy (CAP), “CAP had a positive impact on primary diagnoses and symptomatology, conferring additional

benefits to standard treatments for internalizing disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, and equivalent effects for anxiety, anger and externalizing disorders” (Jones, 2019). Using animals as part of therapy can help individuals in recovery develop a routine and structure in their lives which is important for maintaining sobriety. Finally, working with animals can help individuals in recovery develop empathy and compassion, which can be transferred to relationships with others. Overall, the therapeutic benefits of working with animals can play an important role in the recovery process for individuals dealing with addiction.

### **Implementation Plan**

After developing an action plan that will include specific steps, such as timelines, responsibilities and the resources needed, the agency needs to communicate all changes with everyone involved. The collaborative planning will begin with Avenues coordinator, intern, participants, and the selected agency.

Information will be gathered through a pre-survey questionnaire during the clients intake process. After researching agencies and successfully establishing a set volunteer schedule, Avenues and the animal agency will begin to collaborate together. If needed, training will be provided to support the cause so that everyone understands how to implement the changes and do so effectively. Progress will then be monitored and the plan will be adjusted as needed. The Avenues coordinator and intern will regularly check in on staff, participants and the collaborating agency to assess how well the changes are being implemented and identify any areas for improvement. This is key to knowing if the plan is working.

Feedback will be used to refine the changes and make further improvements as needed. Once the changes have been successfully implemented, they will be embedded into the organization's culture and processes to ensure they become the new norm. This may involve

updating policies and procedures, revising job descriptions, and providing ongoing training and support to employees. A detailed version of this can be seen in Appendix A.

### **Assessment Plan & Expected Outcomes**

The assessment plan for gathering information on whether or not the implementations are working will be collected through a questionnaire using a lacquer scale. The goal is to have the minimum of five current participants or at 40% of the total group of participants to fully participate and make it to the end of their discharge. The goal will hopefully help collect as much data as possible. This questionnaire will allow Avenues to gather information related to how the client rates their own feelings on a scale of 1-5. Questions such as current mood, stress and anxiety levels, and what amount of social interaction they are comfortable with will be asked. Avenues will also do a post survey check-ins every four weeks. This is important because Avenues participants' time in the program varies. A second post survey will then be done during the discharge meeting if applicable. This will allow Avenues to keep track of whether or not its implementations are being successful.

The expected outcome for this implementation is to improve the participants overall well-being and mental health so that they can live a more independent life after attending programs. Some positive results include elevated mood levels, reduced stress, decreased anxiety, and a diminished sense of social isolation. By providing hands-on experiences and community involvement, participants should have a reduction in negative symptoms. Hopefully, allowing the participants to regain some independence and ultimately leading them to a more fulfilling and integrated life.

## **Project Results**

Unfortunately, the anticipated outcomes were unattainable within the designated time frame. Frequent discharging of participants hindered the ability to gather data on whether the implementations were working. The time it takes to complete the intake process, to better understand the client situation, to create the best care plan possible, and the time it takes for the participant to acclimate and establish a routine, consumes the majority of the allotted 45 days. The additional 45 days when readmitted restarts the cycle, extending the time needed for substantial progress within short term programs.

Locating a compatible agency that aligned with the diverse needs of avenues clientele also took more time than planned. The partnership between Avenues and Live Earth Farms had been initiated, however, the collaboration has not been sufficient enough to gather data and assess the effectiveness of the implementation strategies. More time is needed to collect data.

## **Conclusion & Recommendations**

In conclusion, it has become evident that short-term rehab programs do not allow enough time for participants to prepare for life following programs. It is problematic that there are not enough volunteer opportunities for people with mental health and substance abuse disorders, disengaging them from the community. Rehab takes time. Given the study limitations, providing clients with a more supportive time frame allows programs to better focus on the contributing factors. An unengaged or repetitive experience could cause a lack of engagement, and the pressure of taking on a new or foreign responsibility can cause participants to withdraw. When participants commit to attending volunteer outings, and stay in the program without discharging early, it will show positively on Avenues implementation results. A recommendation would be to involve participants in the decision making on where they volunteer for their hands-on training.

This may contribute to a higher participation rate. Whether the implementation process succeeds or fails, achievements such as collaboration with other community agencies took place, opening doors to interested clients.

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## Appendix A

### Project Implementation Plan

Activities	Deliverables	Timeline/Deadlines	Supporting Staff
Decide Capstone project	Decision to make a change	2/10/23	Kelsey Turnbull-Pedrazzini and Caitlin
Decide Capstone paper's name	N/A	2/24/23	Kelsey Turnbull-Pedrazzini and Caitlin
Discuss capstone with professor	Introduce the project	2/24/23	Caitlin
Discuss capstone with mentor	Introduce the project, and gather ideas	3/15/23	Kelsey Turnbull-Pedrazzini
Send emails to at least 5 different agencies	Find potential partners	4/26/23	Kelsey Turnbull-Pedrazzini
Gather staff and participant feedback about what they would like to see	Gather information on what changes need to be addressed	5/3/23	Kelsey Turnbull-Pedrazzini
Finalize problem statement	N/A	9/1/23	Kelsey Turnbull-Pedrazzini and Caitlin
Create implementation process	List out steps for completing project	9/15/23	Kelsey Turnbull-Pedrazzini
Create appendix	Create a timeline for project outcome	9/20/23	Kelsey Turnbull-Pedrazzini
Gather client feedback on current program policies	Find out what concerns there are.	9/27/23	Kelsey Turnbull-Pedrazzini
Follow up with potential collaborating agencies	Confirmation of partnership	9/27/23	Kelsey Turnbull-Pedrazzini
Have participants complete a pre survey	Find a starting point for clients	10/4/23	Kelsey Turnbull-Pedrazzini
Establish a volunteer schedule	Start of a new partnership	10/11/23	Kelsey Turnbull-Pedrazzini, Live Earth Farms
Complete any necessary training	Gain knowledge of agency	11/1/23	Kelsey Turnbull-Pedrazzini
Get the final paper approved.	Written completion	11/1/23	Caitlin
Successfully get clients to volunteer at least 3 times	Put implementations into play	11/8/23	Kelsey Turnbull-Pedrazzini, Live Earth Farms

Have clients create post survey	Collect data to see if implementations worked	11/22/23	Kelsey Turnbull-Pedrazzini
Compare and contrast pre and post survey	Gather project results	11/29/23	Kelsey Turnbull-Pedrazzini,