Center for Health Care Strategies

Expanding Behavioral Health Access in Rural Communities

Expanding Peer Recovery Services in Rural Georgia: A Recovery Community Organization's Approach

Recovery community organizations (RCOs) are community-based, nonprofit entities primarily led and staffed by people with lived experience of substance use disorder (SUD) and recovery. RCOs typically provide peer recovery support services, care navigation, and connections to social services and community resources, while advancing recovery-oriented systems of care (ROSC). Evidence shows that RCOs can help people with SUD stay connected to care and community resources while improving recovery outcomes.

AT-A-GLANCE

Program: Walton Empowers

Location: Walton County, Georgia

Goals: Provide recovery support to individuals and families through advocacy, education and training, and peer recovery support services.

Partners: Walton County Health Care Foundation, Monroe County Sheriff's Office, Piedmont Walton Hospital, Piedmont Primary Care Physicians Group, and Faith in Serving Humanity (FISH)

Target Populations: People and families affected by substance use disorder who are navigating recovery systems.

Key Outcomes: Improved treatment engagement, strengthened recovery outcomes, enhanced access to transportation and community resources, improved court compliance, and reduced recidivism.

As an RCO, Walton Empowers serves as a trusted recovery resource for individuals and families in Walton County and surrounding communities in east-central Georgia. Many rural residents face significant barriers to SUD treatment and recovery support, including transportation challenges, persistent stigma, and limited access to providers and other trained professionals. Walton Empowers addresses these barriers by providing peer recovery support services at its center in the county seat of Monroe and throughout the community, helping peers access care, navigate complex systems, and remain connected to recovery resources. Services include free transportation to treatment, medical and recovery-related appointments, connections to essential community resources, and ongoing peer recovery support. Walton Empowers also creates opportunities for individuals with lived experience of SUD and recovery to pursue peer certification by providing guidance and support throughout the certification process.

EXPANDING BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ACCESS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES SERIES

This profile is part of a series highlighting innovative approaches that leverage community-based workforce roles, such as peers and community health workers, to expand access to behavioral health services in rural communities. Developed for health system leaders, health care providers, community-based organizations, and policymakers, the series offers practical, scalable strategies for strengthening service delivery, addressing access barriers, and building more coordinated systems of care. **LEARN MORE »**

This profile demonstrates how RCOs like Walton Empowers can address rural behavioral health challenges while building a local peer workforce. It describes the organization's implementation approach, staffing model, services, funding mechanisms, outcomes, and lessons for organizations exploring the RCO model and seeking to expand their peer workforce or adopt peer-driven approaches to care.

Implementation Approach

In 2020, Courtney Wright and Cathy Beddow, local peer leaders with lived experience of SUD and recovery, founded Walton Empowers with a shared commitment to expanding community-based, peer-led recovery support in Walton County. Early funding from the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD), supported through State Opioid Response resources, helped the organization establish and expand recovery support services in the community.

Walton Empowers was founded during a time of significant need, amid a worsening overdose crisis, with the county's overdose death rate more than 50 percent above the state average. Wright and Beddow recognized gaps in access to recovery support and the need for a trusted, community-based organization where individuals and families could connect with people who understood recovery through lived experience. That vision became the foundation for Walton Empowers and its continued growth as an RCO.

Today, Walton Empowers provides a welcoming, safe, and supportive community environment where peers and families can access peer recovery support, connect with services and resources, and receive ongoing support as they work toward their individual recovery goals. Through leadership and staff grounded in lived experience, Walton Empowers serves individuals and families in Walton County and surrounding communities, including:

- Adults, children, youth, and pregnant and postpartum women seeking or maintaining recovery from SUD;
- Adults transitioning from incarceration or involved with the criminal justice system;
- People experiencing homelessness or other barriers to stability; and
- Parents, caregivers, and family members impacted by a loved one's substance use.

Programs and Services

Walton Empowers provides a comprehensive range of peer-led programs and recovery support services designed to reduce barriers, strengthen recovery, support individuals and families, and connect peers with treatment and essential community resources. Key programs and services include:

- **Addiction Recovery Support Center (ARSC)**: Serves as the foundation of Walton Empowers' community-based recovery support services. The ARSC offers one-on-one peer support, recovery meetings and groups, resource navigation, recovery education, overdose prevention resources, and connections to treatment and other essential community supports.
- **Community Connections**: Extends peer recovery support into health care and community settings, creating additional pathways for individuals to connect with recovery support at critical points of need. Through partnerships with Piedmont Walton Hospital, primary care and behavioral health providers, and other community partners, peer staff engage individuals, provide recovery support and resource navigation, and connect peers with ongoing services and support.
- **Bridge to Community**: Provides peer recovery support to individuals involved in the criminal justice system and those transitioning from incarceration back into the community. Peer staff connect with individuals before and after release, help them navigate treatment and essential recovery resources, support court and supervision requirements, and provide ongoing peer recovery support as they work toward stability in the community.
- **Empowering Families**: Provides peer support, education, advocacy, and connections to resources for parents, caregivers, and families impacted by substance use and navigating recovery and child welfare systems.
- **Transportation**: Provides free transportation to help individuals access treatment, medical and behavioral health appointments, court-related obligations, recovery support services, and other recovery-related resources.
- **Training and Education**: Provides education and training to community members, professionals, employers, and partner organizations to increase understanding of SUD and recovery, reduce stigma, and strengthen recovery-supportive communities. Walton Empowers also supports individuals interested in becoming certified peers by helping them prepare for and navigate the certification process.

Staffing Model

The RCO operates using a peer-led model, with all staff having lived experience with SUD and recovery. The team includes peer recovery support coaches, program management staff, and community volunteers to deliver services and support daily operations (see the table below for staff roles).

Walton Empowers Staff Roles and Responsibilities

Role	Primary Function
Executive Director	Provides strategic leadership and oversees community partnerships.
Program Director	Manages daily operations, staff, and program activities.
Peer Recovery Coach	Provides peer support, advocacy, education, and resource navigation.
Forensic Peer Mentor	Supports individuals involved in the criminal legal system and reentry process.
Program Coordinator	Oversees program implementation, participant engagement, and outcome reporting.
Transportation Specialist	Drives individuals to medical and behavioral health appointments, court-related obligations, and other recovery-related commitments.
Volunteers	Assist with administrative tasks, events, facility support, and client engagement.

Funding Strategy

The initial 2020 grant from the DBHDD helped support Walton Empowers during its early development. Since then, the organization has continued to secure annual DBHDD funding while diversifying its funding portfolio. Walton Empowers has secured support through a combination of state, regional, and local funding sources, including DBHDD, the Georgia Opioid Abatement Trust, Walton County Health Care Foundation, Walton EMC, and other community partners. This diversified approach has allowed the organization to expand its programs, strengthen its peer workforce, address transportation and other barriers to recovery, and develop partnerships across health care, criminal justice, child welfare, and other community systems.

Like many RCOs, Walton Empowers continues to navigate the challenge of sustaining nonclinical, peer-led services in a funding environment that often depends on time-limited grants. As the organization has grown, its leadership developed a long-term sustainability strategy that diversifies funding while preserving the peer-led, community-based model central to its mission. This strategy includes exploring reimbursement opportunities and partnerships with health systems, behavioral health providers, government agencies, and community organizations, including potential pathways to Medicaid reimbursement for eligible peer recovery support services.

Georgia was the first state to include peer support services as a covered Medicaid benefit. However, reimbursement is limited to authorized providers with clinical oversight, such as Community Behavioral Health providers. Because Walton does not employ licensed clinicians, its most viable path to Medicaid reimbursement is through a partnership with an eligible provider or health system. The organization will carefully evaluate any future funding or reimbursement model to ensure it aligns with its mission, preserves the integrity of peer support, and remains responsive to community needs.

Impact

Since its founding, Walton Empowers has significantly expanded its reach and impact within the community, building strong partnerships across settings, including primary care practices, courts, child welfare agencies, correctional facilities, and social service organizations. Through these relationships, Walton Empowers has increased access to recovery support services and strengthened connections to care. During the first half of 2026, the organization:

- Provided peer recovery support to more than 2,670 individuals.
- Delivered more than 1,990 recovery check-in contacts.
- Recorded 1,312 participant attendances across recovery and education groups.
- Completed 485 transportation assistance requests.
- Delivered 2,500 services to individuals involved in the justice system and initiated 1,107 recovery service connections.

(Source: Walton Empowers 2026 Impact Reports)

While many factors and national trends have likely contributed, the age-adjusted drug overdose death rate in Walton County declined significantly between 2020 and 2025, falling by nearly 50 percent in the years that Walton Empowers has been in operation. Several key strategies have contributed to Walton's impact, including:

- **Strong partnerships with local government agencies, health systems, and community-based organizations.** In a rural community where services are geographically dispersed and often fragmented, strong cross-systems partnerships are essential for improving coordination of care and addressing community members' diverse needs. Walton has built relationships with local jail systems, child welfare agencies, providers, and health care organizations to strengthen access to recovery support and community services. For example, when a new sheriff took office, Walton's leadership met with the sheriff to introduce the organization's Text Line, an initiative that connects people leaving jail with recovery support services and community resources through text messages. Recognizing its value, the sheriff's office allocated funding to establish the Text Line as an official service within the jail system.

In addition to leadership-driven outreach, the organization leverages the community connections and lived experience of its peer staff to identify and cultivate new partnership opportunities. For example, one peer staff member's connection with her primary care physician led to a meeting, and then a referral partnership with Piedmont Primary Care Physicians Group, creating an additional pathway for individuals to connect with peer recovery support through a primary care setting.

- **Transportation support to improve access to care.** Recognizing that transportation is a primary barrier to accessing behavioral health care and recovery supports, Walton secured donations to purchase two vehicles capable of transporting seven to eight passengers and hired a driver with lived experience of SUD and recovery. By providing reliable transportation, Walton helps individuals remain engaged in early recovery, attend appointments and recovery-related commitments, and build greater stability in their lives. Demand for the service has grown, and Walton is exploring funding sources and opportunities to hire additional peer transportation staff.
- **An internal training program to strengthen the peer workforce.** Operating in a rural county, Walton faces ongoing challenges in recruiting and retaining a diverse peer workforce. The organization has a limited pool of available candidates and Georgia has extensive state peer certification requirements which can create additional barriers for aspiring peers who lack the resources, preparation, or support to complete the process successfully. To address these challenges, Walton Empowers developed an internal program that provides foundational training in peer recovery support and ROSC principles, along with guidance through the certification process. Participants can volunteer with the organization to gain the experience, hours, and references needed for certification, with the option to transition into full-time employment once certified.

Implementation Lessons

Walton's experience as an RCO operating in a rural region offers several lessons for RCOs and other rural health organizations seeking to expand their peer workforce and develop more meaningful partnerships and peer-driven models of care, including:

- **Center relationships and community needs when developing partnerships.** Walton Empowers identified systems frequently accessed by its peers and prioritized engagement with those organizations, building relationships that could evolve into formal partnerships. Walton took a proactive approach by requesting introductory meetings, maintaining a visible presence in the community, and educating partners about its services and the value of peer recovery support. The organization also invested in partnership development. For example, it used a grant from the state Office of Recovery Transformation to strengthen its partnership with Georgia's Department of Human Services Division of Family & Children Services to support public outreach. The funding supported outreach activities, including billboards and lunch-and-learn events.

- **Leverage lived experience as an asset to guide partnerships and programming.** Walton Empowers' leadership brings lived experience of recovery as well as firsthand experience navigating systems that often intersect with substance use, including child welfare and the courts. These experiences have shaped the organization's understanding of the barriers individuals and families face when seeking help and informed its commitment to building practical, compassionate pathways to recovery support. This lived experience also strengthens Walton Empowers' ability to build trust, advocate effectively, and develop meaningful partnerships across systems. For example, Walton is working closely with the sheriff's office to distribute Narcan in county jail waiting rooms alongside information about their services, creating opportunities to connect people and their families with life-saving recovery support and resources at critical moments of need.

> **We just started showing up and sat in the courtroom, and would just sit there, and tell them who we were, and introduce ourselves, and just continue to show up until the judge finally noticed…and now we are intertwined into all the court programs.**
>
> - Courtney Wright, Executive Director, Walton Empowers

- **Build community visibility and trust to combat stigma.** Stigma can be a significant barrier to accessing SUD care and recovery support, especially in close-knit rural communities. Recognizing this challenge early, Walton Empowers' leadership and staff developed consistent messaging about the organization's mission and services and deliberately worked to build visibility and trust within the community. They leveraged networking opportunities through the local Chamber of Commerce, pursued speaking engagements at town halls and community meetings, and maintained a regular presence in community spaces. As awareness and trust grew, they began hosting their own networking events, such as luncheons that attracted key stakeholders including judges, attorneys, and other community leaders. Many of these people became Walton's trusted partners and advocates, helping to connect more people with their services. Walton's strong community presence and ongoing relationship-building efforts continue to build local support for its work and awareness of recovery services.

- **Plan for long-term sustainability of peer recovery services and related programs.** Like many peer-run organizations, Walton Empowers faces ongoing challenges balancing community needs with maintaining financial stability. To support its broad range of programs and services, the organization has consistently pursued multiple grants and other short-term funding opportunities. This diversified funding strategy has helped Walton Empowers reduce its reliance on any single funding source and minimize the risk of service disruptions. New funding opportunities, such as the federal Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP), may offer Walton Empowers and similar rural organizations access to time-limited funding to build toward sustainability. Although Walton is not currently pursuing

RHTP funding, its leadership has expressed interest in learning how the organization might contribute to Georgia's broader RHTP implementation efforts. Other organizations may similarly look to RHTP funds as a source of investment in critical infrastructure, or as initial funding to support operations while longer-term financing options are identified.

Considerations for RHTP Planning

RHTP provides states with an opportunity to make targeted investments that address persistent barriers to care in rural communities and strengthen the coordination and infrastructure needed to support sustainable service delivery. The program focuses on advancing strategic partnerships, workforce development, sustainable access to care, innovative care models, and technology innovation. Based on Walton Empowers experience, the following recommendations highlight how RHTP funds can be used to expand and support RCO models. State agencies, health systems, and other RHTP stakeholders should consider:

- **Offering start-up grants** to support the expansion and replication of RCOs and the array of services they can offer.
- **Supporting partnerships between RCOs and clinical providers** to strengthen care coordination and facilitate access to sustainable funding mechanisms.
- **Investing in peer workforce development**, including training, certification, and career pathways for people with lived experience.
- **Funding nonclinical supports**, such as transportation and peer recovery services, that address barriers to engagement and retention in care.
- **Supporting collaboration with key state and regional stakeholders** on reimbursement models that can sustain RCOs and reduce reliance on grant funding.
- **Providing capacity-building resources** to help community-based organizations manage contracts, reporting requirements, and cross-sector partnerships.
- **Engaging RCOs and peer-led organizations in planning and implementation** to ensure programs and policies reflect local needs, community priorities, and lived experience.

Looking Ahead

Walton Empowers demonstrates how peer-run organizations can build strong cross-system partnerships to improve access to coordinated care, recovery supports, and community resources for people with SUD and in recovery. The organization also offers a model for addressing workforce shortages by investing in a home-grown peer workforce and creating pathways to certification, professional development, and employment. Its experience highlights the value of peer leadership, relationship-building, and community engagement in strengthening referral networks and expanding access to behavioral health services in rural settings.

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Resources for RCO Implementation

The following resources provide guidance on developing, strengthening, and sustaining RCOs:

- **National Standards for RCOs** – This webpage outlines a set of national best practices to help organizations maintain fidelity to the RCO model. *(Faces & Voices of Recovery)*
- **Recovery Community Organization Toolkit** – This toolkit shares practical guidance on how to create and operate an RCO and plan for sustainability. *(Faces & Voices of Recovery)*
- **Council on Accreditation of Peer Recovery Support Services** – This national accrediting body for RCOs and other peer recovery support providers offers technical assistance to new and established RCOs to build capacity and improve quality of services.
- **Center for Addiction Recovery Support** – This national recovery support directory can help individuals and communities find peer recovery programs by state, along with information on state peer certification requirements and resources.
- **The Value of Recovery Community Centers in Addiction Care: Insights from a Tireless Recovery Advocate** – This blog post features insights from the former Deputy Director of the Office of Recovery at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration on the role and value of Recovery Community Centers operated by RCOs. *(Center for Health Care Strategies)*
- **Rural Substance Use Disorders Prevention, Treatment, and Recovery Toolkit** – This toolkit provides evidence-based models, implementation best practices, and practical resources to support organizations implementing SUD prevention, treatment, and recovery support programs in rural communities. *(Rural Health Information Hub)*
- **Measuring Peer Recovery Outcomes Toolkit** – This toolkit provides practical tools and evaluation resources to help organizations measure the impact of peer recovery support services using strengths-based, culturally responsive approaches. *(Peer Recovery Center of Excellence)*

By Vanessa Finisse, Center for Health Care Strategies

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