



we speak from experience

Winter 2026 Newsletter

Meet the Network Program Director Jalna M. Harris

Vocal Virginia welcomes Jalna M. Harris as Network Program Director! Jalna brings bold vision and deep commitment to peer-led-advocacy, recovery and systems transformation. Grounded in lived experience leadership and driven by collaboration, Jalna is dedicated to empowering Virginian's with mental health challenges to shape policy, strengthen communities, and lead change across the behavioral health system.



Jalna M. Harris

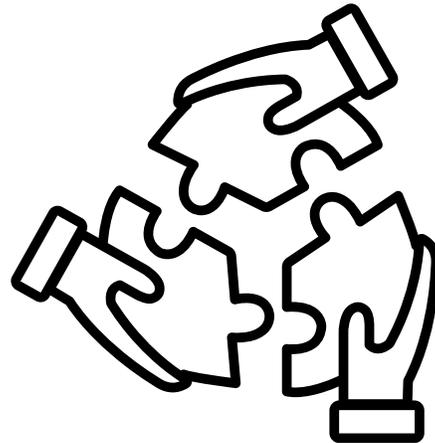
With a passion for creative problem solving, coalition-building, and recover-oriented practice, she will advance Vocal Virginia's advocacy agenda, amplify member voices, and help build a more just, responsive and people-powered mental health system statewide. Martin Mash, Vocal Virginia's Executive Director said, "Vocal Virginia is delighted that Jalna will be joining us as Network Program Director. Her professionalism and commitment to peer leadership and recovery distinguish here as an advocate." According to Jalna, "All you need is People, Purpose, and a Plan."

Meet the Network Program Director

Jalna M. Harris (Cont.)

Previously, Jalna served as a Regional Recovery Coordinator with the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS), where she contributed to initiatives that supported system coordination, recovery-oriented practices, and cross sector collaboration among community services boards, recovery organizations and state partners. Her work reflects a steady focus on improving access, strengthening connections, and supporting individuals and communities.

Jalna believes wellness reflects individuals functioning at their highest potential and approaches her leadership with care, intention, and a deep passion for behavioral health. She is focused on strengthening partnerships, advancing practical and sustainable strategies, and supporting policies that promote access, equity, and long-term recovery across Virginia's behavioral health system.



As Vocal Virginia looks ahead, Jalna's leadership opens the door to deeper connection, bolder advocacy, and collective action. Whether you're curious about Vocal Virginia's work, want to get involved, or have questions or ideas related to our advocacy priorities, Jalna welcomes the conversation. She believes lasting change happens when voices come together, and your voice matters. Reach out, get connected, and be a part of shaping a stronger, more inclusive, and recovery-driven behavioral health system of all Virginians.

Please feel free to contact Jalna at jalna@vocalvirginia.org.

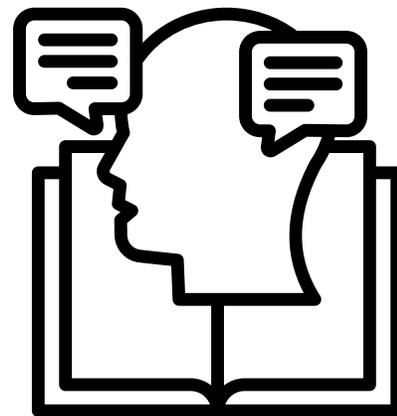
The Power -- and Responsibility -- of Sharing Our Stories

Our stories are among the most meaningful tools we carry with us. They can create connection, offer hope, and remind someone that they are not alone in what they're facing. At the same time, our stories are deeply personal and deserve care. When shared thoughtfully -- with intention, respect, and awareness of the moment -- they can open doors to understanding and healing in ways few other things can.

In peer support, the question is rarely "Should I share my story?" but rather, "What part of my story might be helpful right now?"

When deciding what to share, it can be helpful to pause and ask a few guiding questions:

- Does this story support the person in front of me?
- Am I sharing to connect -- or to process something unresolved?
- Is the story relevant to what they're experiencing right now?



The Power -- and Responsibility -- of Sharing Our Stories (Cont.)

It is also important to recognize that sometimes the most supportive choice is not to share. There are moments when restraint is the most ethical and helpful response. For example, it may be best to pause if sharing would shift the focus away from the person seeking support, become overly detailed or emotionally raw, or arise in a moment when the other person has not invited it. Ethical storytelling includes recognizing when listening is the most powerful form of support we can offer.

Equally important is protecting ourselves as peer supporters. Sharing our stories should feel as safe for us as it is supportive for the person who is listening. Our stories belong to us -- we get to decide when, where, and how to tell them. Many peers use the phrase “share from your scars, not your wounds” to remind ourselves that we do not have to revisit raw or unresolved pain to help others. We also do not owe our trauma to anyone, and we are always allowed to change how much we share over time.

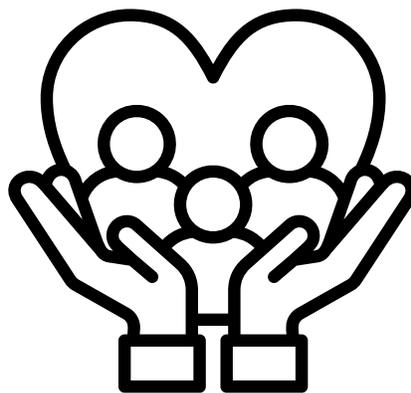


Our stories are powerful tools, but they are also deeply personal parts of who we are. Using them with care -- for others and for ourselves -- is part of what makes peer support such meaningful work.

The Power -- and Responsibility -- of Sharing Our Stories (Cont.)

3 Questions to Ask Before Sharing Your Story

1. Who is this for? Am I sharing to support the person in front of me, or because I need to express something right now? Ethical storytelling centers the needs of the person we are supporting.
2. Is it relevant to this moment? Does this piece of my story connect meaningfully to what the other person is experiencing, or might it shift the focus away from them?
3. Is this a story I'm comfortable sharing today? Our stories belong to us. We get to decide when, where, and how we tell them. If sharing feels emotionally raw or vulnerable in a way that doesn't feel safe, it is okay to choose not to share.



Legislative Updates from the Virginia General Assembly

The Virginia General Assembly convened in January and adjourned in March, bringing together legislators from across the Commonwealth to debate and decide the laws and budget priorities that shape Virginia's future. During this time, lawmakers consider legislation affecting health care, education, public safety, and behavioral health services. Vocal Virginia's role during the General Assembly is to help ensure that the voices of people with lived experience are present in these conversations—sharing information, educating policymakers, and helping connect the perspectives of individuals and communities to legislative decision-making.

HB43 - Suicide; Abolishes Common-Law Crime

Patron: Delegate Marcus Simon

HB43 removes outdated language from Virginia law that treated suicide as a criminal act under common law. The legislation recognizes that suicide is a **mental health and public health issue**, not a crime. By removing this language, Virginia law better reflects modern behavioral health understanding and helps reduce stigma surrounding mental health challenges.

This change reflects the broader shift toward treating mental health concerns through **support, treatment, and recovery-oriented services rather than punishment**.

Status: The bill passed both the House and Senate and has been sent to the Governor.

Governor's Action Deadline: April 13 at 11:59 PM. Read More Here: [HB43 - 2026 Regular Session | LIS](#)

Legislative Updates from the Virginia General Assembly (Cont.)

HB209 – Peer Recovery Specialist Hiring Guidelines

Patron: Delegate Price

HB209 directs the Virginia Department of Health and the Department of Corrections to develop guidelines for hiring **Peer Recovery Specialists**. Peer specialists use their lived experience to support individuals navigating mental health and substance use recovery.

By encouraging clearer hiring pathways for peer roles within state agencies, this legislation helps expand the peer workforce and strengthen recovery-oriented services across Virginia. Increasing access to peer support can improve engagement in services, strengthen recovery outcomes, and help individuals feel understood and supported by someone who has walked a similar path.

Status: The bill passed both the House and Senate. Read More Here: [HB209 - 2026 Regular Session | LIS](#)



Legislative Updates from the Virginia General Assembly (Cont.)

HB245 – Behavioral Health Docket Act

Patron: Delegate Vivian Watts

HB245 allows district courts to establish **behavioral health specialty dockets**, creating alternative pathways for individuals whose legal challenges are connected to mental health or substance use issues.

These specialty dockets help connect individuals with treatment, services, and recovery supports while addressing court involvement in a more effective and supportive way.

Status: The bill passed both chambers of the General Assembly. Read More Here: [HB245 - 2026 Regular Session | LIS](#)

HB248 – Behavioral Health Co-Response Teams

Patron: Delegate Vivian Watts

HB248 supports the development of **interjurisdictional agreements** that allow communities to establish behavioral health co-response teams. These teams often pair law enforcement officers with behavioral health professionals when responding to crisis situations.

Co-response models help ensure individuals experiencing behavioral health crises receive appropriate care while also improving safety for first responders and communities.

Status: The bill passed both chambers of the General Assembly. Read More Here: [HB248 - 2026 Regular Session | LIS](#)

Legislative Updates from the Virginia General Assembly (Cont.)

HB30 / SB30 - Budget Amendment Item 301 PP

Peer Wellness Stay Programs

The state budget bills **HB30 and SB30** include funding through **Item 301 PP** to support Peer Wellness Stay Programs across Virginia. These programs provide a community-based crisis support option where individuals experiencing emotional or behavioral health distress can receive short-term stabilization and support from trained peers with lived experience.

The budget amendment includes:

- **\$3,302,053 in FY1**
- **\$3,302,053 in FY2**

Total Biennial Investment: \$6,604,106

Peer Wellness Stay Programs provide a voluntary, trauma-informed, peer-led environment that helps individuals stabilize and reconnect with community supports while reducing reliance on emergency departments, law enforcement involvement, and inpatient hospitalization.

This investment represents an important step toward expanding recovery-oriented crisis alternatives and strengthening Virginia's behavioral health system.

Status: The Budget bill is still under consideration and will be further considered in a special session because of differences between the House and Senate versions of the bill. Read More Here: [HB30 301 PP Peer Wellness Stay Program Funding](#)

Legislative Updates from the Virginia General Assembly (Cont.)

As the 2026 General Assembly session comes to a close, we extend our deepest gratitude to all of our members, partners, and advocates whose unwavering support and enthusiasm made this work possible. Your voices, lived experiences, and commitment to advancing behavioral health have been essential in shaping meaningful progress across the Commonwealth. From reducing stigma and expanding peer support to strengthening crisis response and investing in innovative recovery programs, these achievements reflect the power of collective advocacy. Thank you for standing with us, engaging in this process, and helping ensure that policies are informed by compassion, understanding, and the real needs of our communities. Please feel free to communicate with us throughout the year on policy related topics that are important to you.

To learn more, or to start a conversation on how you can be more engaged please contact network@vocalvirginia.org.



Chris' Place-Northern Virginia's First Peer-Led Wellness Stay Program

A new and innovative recovery support option has opened in Northern Virginia: Chris' Place, a peer-led wellness stay program created by the Chris Atwood Foundation in partnership with the Fairfax-Falls Church Community Services Board.

Chris' Place represents a growing movement in behavioral health care—community-based alternatives to hospitalization that provide people experiencing emotional distress with time, space, and support in a safe and welcoming environment.



Chris' Place-Northern Virginia's First Peer-Led Wellness Stay Program (Cont.)

Unlike traditional clinical settings, Chris' Place is designed to feel more like a home than a hospital. Individuals who are experiencing elevated emotional distress, trauma responses, or challenges related to mental health or substance use can step away from the pressures of daily life and focus on stabilizing their wellbeing.

At Chris' Place, guests are welcomed by Certified Peer Recovery Specialists—individuals who bring their own lived experience with recovery. This peer-led approach is rooted in empathy, mutual understanding, and the belief that recovery is strengthened when people feel seen, heard, and supported by others who have walked similar paths.

The program emphasizes:

- Rest and emotional stabilization
- Peer connection and supportive conversation
- Recovery planning and resource navigation
- Strengthening resilience and wellness skills

These supports help individuals return home calmer, better equipped, and connected to ongoing resources in their communities.

Chris' Place-Northern Virginia's First Peer-Led Wellness Stay Program (Cont.)



The Chris Atwood Foundation presents



CHRIS' PLACE

A Peer-Led Wellness Stay

Providing Northern Virginia a place for people who are at risk of, or are currently experiencing elevated distress due to an emotional crisis or trauma response.

NO COST

- Six Private Rooms ✓
- Transportation Provided ✓
- Serving all of Northern Virginia ✓
- For adults 18+ ✓
- Staffed with Peer Support Specialists ✓
- Voluntary ✓
- Easy Check-In ✓
- Stay up to 14-days ✓

At Chris' Place, we support individuals navigating emotional crisis or trauma. We provide the time and space needed for rest, focusing on alleviating mental distress and strengthening overall wellbeing.

For more information, contact 
703-888-5007
CHRISPLACE@THECAF.ORG
www.thecaf.org

Chris' Place-Northern Virginia's First Peer-Led Wellness Stay Program (Cont.)

Chris' Place is operated by the Chris Atwood Foundation, a Northern Virginia nonprofit dedicated to saving lives, supporting recovery, and building recovery-ready communities through harm reduction, peer support, education, and advocacy.

The foundation was established in memory of Chris Atwood, who died from an accidental overdose at age 21. Since then, the organization has worked to expand recovery support services, distribute life-saving naloxone, advocate for compassionate drug policy, and provide peer-based programs throughout Northern Virginia.

The partnership with the Fairfax-Falls Church Community Services Board helps integrate Chris' Place into the broader behavioral health system, strengthening the region's continuum of crisis support services.



Chris Atwood

Member Spotlight: Kevin Conn

From Living as a Recovery Hero to Writing as a Recovery Hero

Kevin Conn, CPRS

Kevin Conn's path into the peer profession began in 2021, but the qualities that make him such an effective peer supporter—humor, empathy, and a natural ability to connect with people—were evident long before that.



Kevin Conn

Today Kevin serves as a Certified Peer Recovery Specialist with the Chris Atwood Foundation and is part of the team supporting guests at Chris' Place, a peer-led wellness stay program in Northern Virginia.

But Kevin's story begins much earlier, in the kind of experiences many people in recovery understand deeply.

Member Spotlight: Kevin Conn

From Living as a Recovery Hero to Writing as a Recovery Hero

Like many who later enter peer work, Kevin faced his own struggles with depression and emotional challenges. Rather than letting those struggles define him, Kevin eventually found a way to transform them into something meaningful -- something that could help others.

What emerged was a powerful combination of creativity, humor, and lived experience.

Kevin is known among colleagues and peers as a natural-born comedian. He has the rare ability to bring laughter into spaces that may feel heavy, using humor to break down walls and help people feel safe. But behind the quick wit is someone who listens deeply and understands the courage it takes for people to share their struggles.

That combination makes him uniquely suited for peer support work.

Kevin often describes discovering peer support as a turning point in his life. Instead of hiding the parts of his story that once felt painful, he realized those experiences could become the very tools that allow him to connect with others.

As he has shared: "I'm grateful to have discovered a way to use my lived experience to help others like me."

Member Spotlight: Kevin Conn

From Living as a Recovery Hero to Writing as a Recovery Hero

In addition to his peer work, Kevin is also a creator and storyteller.

He is the writer behind the graphic novel *Commander Tomorrow*, an all-ages science fiction adventure. On the surface, the story is filled with intergalactic action and imaginative worlds. But beneath the adventure lies something more personal.



The hero of the story navigates struggles with depression, anxiety, and identity, reflecting many of the same themes Kevin has experienced in his own life. Through storytelling, Kevin explores the idea that heroes are not only the characters we read about—they can also be the people who face their struggles, learn from them, and choose to keep moving forward.

In many ways, Kevin has created heroes not only in the pages of his comic book, but within himself.

That same spirit of resilience and creativity is what he brings to his work every day. At Chris' Place, Kevin supports individuals who are experiencing emotional distress and need a safe space to regroup and reconnect with their recovery. His approach blends humor, compassion, and genuine understanding—helping people feel heard, valued, and capable of finding their own path forward.

Member Spotlight: Kevin Conn

From Living as a Recovery Hero to Writing as a Recovery Hero

Colleagues often say Kevin has a gift for helping people feel comfortable almost instantly. Whether through laughter, conversation, or simply sitting with someone during a difficult moment, he embodies the Chris Atwood Foundation's guiding philosophy:

"No judgment, just love."

Kevin's story is a reminder of something powerful about recovery.

Sometimes the heroes we admire most are not the ones in stories or movies—but the people who have faced darkness, found their way through it, and now help others do the same.

And for many people who will walk through the doors of Chris' Place, Kevin Conn will be exactly that kind of hero.

Learn more: [Commander Tomorrow-Graphic Novel](#)





Vocal Virginia advocates with and for the mental health community by sharing a unique, experience-driven perspective that empowers us to educate with empathy and collaborate with care.

Vocal Virginia is the only state-wide mental health organization in Virginia that is 100% staffed and governed by individuals living with mental health challenges.

The deadline for the next issue of the "Vocal Virginia Newsletter" is **June 1, 2026**. Send submissions via email to network@vocalvirginia.org, or by postal mail to:

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