

Ask Me Anything Webinar with LaVerne Miller, September 18, 2018

Start at: 10:00

David Blair: Well, good afternoon, and welcome to Ask Me Anything about Employment with LaVerne Miller. My name is David Blair, and I'll be your moderator today. This webinar is not a presentation but an interactive question and answer period. And for the next hour, LaVerne will take any questions you have related to employment. LaVerne is a Senior Project Associate at Policy Research Associates and has over 20 years of leadership experience in transforming behavior health systems and integrating individuals with lived experience into programs planning, implementation, service delivery, and evaluation. She leads peer-focused activities at SAMHSA's GAINS Center for Behavioral Health and Justice Transformation. Ms. Miller provides technical assistance to programs to improve recruiting, hiring, integrating, and advancing peer staff. She has also provided technical assistance to mental health transformation products, including programs with peer staff, providing evidence-based practices, such as supported employment, supported housing, supported education, critical time intervention, and trauma-informed care. Ms. Miller is the former Director of the internationally-recognized Howie the Harp Peer Advocacy Center in New York. In this role, she developed the first training program to prepare justice-involved peers to work in criminal justice settings. She has developed curricula and an internship program to prepare graduates to work in the human services as peers and other roles. A member of the New York State Bar, Ms. Miller has worked as Assistant District Attorney in New York County and as an attorney and community organizer with Jamaica Housing Improvement.

Today's event is jointly funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research, and the Center for Mental Health Services within the Substance Abuse, and Mental Health Services Administration. The content of this webinar does not represent the views or policies of the funding agencies, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government. During registration for the event, you were given the chance to submit a question in advance. Over the course of the webinar, we will alternate between questions submitted in advance and the ones you have today. You may ask questions now by typing them into the chat box or letting me know you would like to ask by phone. With that, welcome to the webinar, and I hope everyone attending enjoys the next hour. And welcome. LaVerne, how are you doing?

LaVerne Miller: Hi. Good afternoon from New York State. I just want to welcome everyone. And David and your team, I thank you for the opportunity to talk about a justice-involved peers and really to identify some of the challenges that not only they experience, but also the individuals, the organizations that wish to hire them. For those on the call, this call is timely. I think we're all looking at the implications for involvement in the criminal justice system and what those of us that are really committed and really believe that employment is part of the

recovery process is now we can make that happen. I hope you'll find this a discussion helpful, we're going to have a little fun and some interaction, and I really hope that we're able to answer most, if not all, of your questions. So, David.

David: All right, well, I think given that little introduction you have the first question for you is from Joan, and Joan asks, "What can individuals do who want to work to find out what their actual record says and can any parts of their record be expunged?"

LaVerne: That's a wonderful question. I think it really has to do, some of the issues have to deal with the state that you're in, and that is a very state specific and I would, there's, in the chat box, I'm going to put some resources in a moment, but there are two organizations like Council for State Governments and the Legal Action Center that really do a walk-through about criminal justice conviction and the kind of impact that it has. You question about expungement. Expungement is again a state-specific issue, and so the best place to find that kind of information. What I found with most states is really to contact your State Attorney General's office, and they should have information that's available and timely on that particular issue. And so the other part of your question, I think it's, unfortunately, individuals with criminal justice history, there's some collateral consequences, again it's state specific, and those resources will help you identify what sorts of employment or what other kinds of, what we call, some of the rights of citizenship, that you may temporarily lose either during or following a connection. But I really want to recommend to everyone is, if you have a criminal justice history, that you go to your State Attorney Generals, your State Department of State, or your criminal justice agency will be able to give you a copy, an official copy of your, what we call, your Rap Sheet. It's important that if many of us don't have funds, and generally with state agencies, there's a waiver process or often state agencies, often agencies, like Legal Aid Society and consumer-run programs that can help you pay the fee. I would recommend that you scrutinize your Rap Sheet because often, there are errors. You may see warrants or convictions that didn't happen, and so to really thoroughly review it and take whatever action may need to be taken to correct it. It can be a lengthy process, but worthwhile. Go ahead, David.

David: Oh no, that wasn't me. I think, I think we're hearing something. Go ahead.

LaVerne: So yeah, it takes time to do it, so it's not going to happen overnight, but really what I would really recommend is that you scrutinize it. The other thing is that most states have something that's called a Certificate of Relief for Disability, and that really means that some of your rights that you may lose by virtue of a criminal conviction, that those rights can be restored, and you can actually go before a court and request that on your own.

David: During that answer you said that it takes a while. What type of timeline are we looking at? Is it weeks, months, years?

LaVerne: I think it depends. If you're able to get work with an agency, an advocacy agency that's familiar with working with individuals with criminal justice histories, often they're familiar with what kind of information, the process, and how long it may take. I think it ranges depending upon things, like where the records are stored. Some, most states now are computerized, but some of the records, for example, haven't been computerized, so that someone's got to go back and look at some of the other information. But it really ranges. I think the most important thing is that you have someone help you scrutinize with some criminal justice experience. They don't have to be a lawyer, but you really look carefully at their criminal justice history when you obtain it. And often there's a way to really request an expedited copy in many jurisdictions and that may be because you're applying for jobs. So be mindful of those exceptions to kind of timelines that we always see.

David: Alright, well thank you. And you mentioned the organization, the Council for State Governments, and I've gone ahead and put that into the chat box. It's www.esg.org. So that's how you can get to their website. So I'll go ahead and go onto the next question. And again, if anyone who is here today wants to ask a question, please just type it into the chat box, and we'll be sure to get to you. So the second person is from Massachusetts, and I apologize if I pronounce this wrong. It's Obida and they're a Peer Engagement Specialist and they ask, "How do you explain your 'criminal justice experience' at a state position interview?"

LaVerne: Okay. I know the one thing about it, I want to encourage everyone, is don't be ashamed of that experience. Often they are, you've been able to take classes; there are other kinds of activities that you've been able to engage in, despite your criminal justice history. So my suggestion is really number one is to be familiar with the state. Often state restrictions on, for example, someone who can be employed, what kinds of convictions, and so it's really important to know, for example, whether a person with a felony has some restrictions on their employment, or a person with the misdemeanor, and that really means in legal terms. A misdemeanor is something that a crime where you're sentenced generally to jail and that can be a year or less; and a felony is generally you're sent to state prison, and it's really one year or more. Often states, and the wonderful thing that we're really seeing is that they're building in exceptions that if you're able to demonstrate that you're rehabilitated, that you participated in the community. All those great things I know many of you have done since you've been released from jail or prison, that's often important to point those things out. And should you get an interview, you can, you should, I think you talk about what you've learned, the skill set you have that you've matured or whatever the situation may be. But most importantly, don't be ashamed. Basically, those are parts of it. We know certain folks get involved in the criminal justice system, sometimes through no fault of their own. And it's really important that you be able to be your best advocate.

David: Alright, in my own experience, just when I'm trying to do things, it's finding the right words to use to describe it. So, if I was interviewing you, and I said, "LaVerne, I see that you

marked that you have a criminal justice record. Can you tell me about that?" What words would you use to describe?

LaVerne: The first thing is really to make sure what the law is within your state, because one thing that I find is it's illegal on any application to ask about an arrest, and I think all of you should know that to really understand, to really look at the application and what kinds of convictions that you have to write about truthfully, on your application. But also for those jobs where you have to get some sort of clearance to really understand what, that again, but criminal justice record which indicates. I think it's about, David, it's about saying, "I'm really enthusiastic about meeting you. I've got skills and talents that I think will be an asset. There was a point in my life where I got involved in activities that I'm not particularly proud of. But since that time I've done everything that I can to do well and be an active and engaged citizen. And I really look forward to having an opportunity. I think I'd be an asset. Not I think, I know I will be an asset, and really, what I think is I'd like to have a chance. I like to have a chance to demonstrate that to you." I think it's really about using positive language, not being ashamed, and really avoiding not telling the truth, which is what I find some people do, but really to be able to say that basically you've accomplished a lot and that you deserve an opportunity.

David: Sure. Thank you for that. We'll move onto the next question, no one has shared anything in the room. And again, I feel like I really want to encourage people to ask questions who are here now and not to be afraid to just say what it is. And if you're afraid of asking in general, you can send me a direct message, and I'll read it to LaVerne for you. So moving to the next question, Kathleen, and this is a longer one so you go a little bit. Kathleen says, "I have a situation in which two peer-run agencies staffs six supported housing agencies with peer specialists, so two peer agencies with six supportive housing agencies. The peer specialist work, which is to begin soon, is to provide information and support for individuals interested in moving into supportive housing. And the question is, how can I ensure consistent service provision across peer specialists, who must work within two different peer-run agency cultures as well as within the different cultures of the supported housing agencies?" So there's a lot going on there, so if you need to take that.

LaVerne: I think that's a wonderful question, and I think it's really important. What I would really recommend is meeting with the supervisors of each program and really getting an idea of what sorts of differences they may be. And also to identify what sorts of training peers may need in order to perform the essential job functions well. I think notwithstanding that there may be different expectations regarding each employer, maybe different rules around vacation, around what have you. The peers from both programs really should meet on a regular basis to provide, we all know that peer support is the best kind of support, to really talk about their challenges, to brainstorm solutions, and the like, to really be an asset to each other. And really where you have, I think it's really important to identify those common things that peers have, regardless of where they are working. That issue about choice, life in the community, that peers

providing services need to be, must be transparent, and those values and principles that are really important to each program. And I would prepare a training for both agencies recommending that the supervisors and other key staff attend it, and really educate folks around what recovery is, what kinds of activities really promoted recovery, what kind of supervision peers need in order to succeed, and really to answer any questions that they have. Because often folks don't know it because they don't know it. And so really it's really incumbent upon us many times to be the educator around the values of peer support. Finally, cultures are hard to change. They're very, I often say, it's like turning a ship in an ocean, and it takes a long time. Or when you see a tugboat bringing a cruise ship in, and it's like, when is that ship going to land, dock? But change is, and often it's incremental, it doesn't happen overnight. But I really would recommend that you develop a training for both the peers as well as the supervisors and the other key staff. And you look at policies and practices for both programs that promote the recruitment, the hiring of the peer staff, that there are opportunities for career advancement. And that they, one other thing is really looking at something that I've found, is we don't typically exercise our rights under the American with Disabilities Act. And I don't know how many of you know that. But, it's really, it gives an individual with a disability, and mental illness is really one of them, really a right to have a reasonable accommodation, so long that if it doesn't disrupt the business. So it's really important again, that as you're training and providing support to the peers as well as the key staff, is that you educate everyone about what a reasonable accommodation is. And one of the other things, thank you, Mr. Cooler, that folks need to understand is that there's really this watershed, which is fantastic, of reform around criminal justice and many states, like Massachusetts, or cities, like New York City, have done what we call, Ban the Box. And that means no question can be asked about your conviction until after you've been offered the position. And, if anyone wants to have a question, why do you think that's important? Why is that a policy? That's real critical to providing opportunities for those of us with criminal justice histories.

David: Was that a question for me?

LaVerne: Yeah, that's a question to the group. We're going to get lively today. Anyone know why that's important? Go ahead.

David: I think someone else will speak up, but.

LaVerne: Yeah, I'm going to ask Mr. Kugler from Massachusetts, if he's on the line, and if he wants to answer that. Okay. Any. Okay, I'm going to count to two. Go ahead.

David: That's okay. Hopefully.

LaVerne: Well, I'll tell. I'll just say why it's really important. Because you want a person to interview you, not viewing you through a prism of your criminal justice history. You want someone to really look at your qualities, your interpersonal skills, your work experience, and

the like. And it really what it's intended to do is to eliminate discrimination against our brothers and sisters who have criminal justice records. One of the challenges with states or localities that have implemented this is there really is very little enforcement, and we all know if your rights are violated and there's no enforcement mechanism. In other words, there's no place where you can go to complain that an employer asked you about your criminal justice record before you were hired. It's a challenge. So I would say rights without, what we call in the legal profession, due process, makes it really challenging. But again, mostly all 50 states are engaging in some type of reform around how criminal justice records can be considered.

David: Yeah. And Mr. Kugler said that you said it better than he could have.

LaVerne: No, I didn't, Mr. Krueger, I didn't. But thanks for bringing that up because that's key. It's really important that those of us that have criminal justice records don't walk around with that scarlet letter, that 'A' or, in this case, it will be a 'C' that lets everyone know that we have a criminal justice history when that's just maybe a small part of our lives.

David: And the answer to Kathleen's question, you talked a lot about what leads to success. Is there anything that jumps out in your mind of things that lead to failure?

LaVerne: I do. I mean, I think one of the most important things is that often people feel shame, and we all know that when you feel ashamed, you're unable to really advocate for yourself, you set low expectations for yourself with respect to employment, and you don't really have a hope for the future. So I think when people feel shame, it has a negative impact. The lack of family support for many of us as we transition to employment, particularly if we have both a mental health condition as well as a criminal justice history. We need family support, we need cheerleaders. And if you don't have family support, that can often be a negative. The other thing that really impacts negatively on many folks, in terms of transitioning to employment, is a lot of the misinformation that's out there around benefits like Social Security, SSI and Social Security Disability Insurance. I think that's another thing that can lead to failure, not really being aware of what the impact of work can have upon those benefits. The other thing, I think what I've seen is really understanding that a job is a job, and that it's really important that notwithstanding some of the challenges we all experienced that you take your responsibilities very seriously, and that to the best of your ability, you perform your job. And if you need a reasonable accommodation change in schedule that you be able to do that. Because my experience is that people often like abandon their jobs when something bad happens because all it does is reinforce the us, we're not being that, what I call that record playing in your mind. And so it's very, very important to put on another record to take that old record off and to view yourself as a, create what I call a new narrative for you. And finally, it's having a network, really taking advantage. I often meet peers, people with criminal justice history, that you are really afraid about networking with other people. We feel very comfortable in our space. Networking with people that have first-hand experience, I want to encourage all of you that it is a big wide world out there. Everybody has problems, and that there are folks that can be mentors that can

support you and your goals, and can be your cheerleaders, and they don't have to have or share the same experiences that you have, and really take advantage of that.

David: And, Steve is in the room, just says, "I am ashamed of my past forensic history, but I am not my past. I am nothing what my offense was. And I have had 15 years since that I have proven myself." That's the sentiment you're getting to.

LaVerne: Yeah, I think that's wonderful. It's all about your attitude. It's all about feeling basically that you deserve all the rights and privileges as any other citizen in this country has and that one of the most important things is not to give up. Don't ever give up, but also take advantage of the support that peer organizations and other organizations can provide as you embark upon this journey, just like anyone. When you're looking for job nowadays, it's on the web, you don't get a letter, you don't know; it's really, I would say it's really important to have support as you go through the process.

David: Switching to a different question now, Jennifer writes in and says, "How does the disclosure of a mental health condition differ from hiring any other qualified employee? I struggled to see the difference."

LaVerne: Yeah. I think, it's a difference without a difference. One of the challenges is that in order to be eligible for a reasonable accommodation, you have to disclose that information. And one of the things that's really important is that information doesn't, when you go to the human resources office, or whatever part of the employer that really handles the reasonable accommodation, that your records are not, not if they state they're safe, they're supposed to be secured in the HR office and no one has access to them. And I would say it's really important that type of privacy is really critical. So I recommend always that to not wait till it's a performance issue before you talk to your supervisor about needing a reasonable accommodation and that you really speak with human resources about what you need. I also think that it's important as we, as people with lived experience, and I say you have to be careful about disclosure. Your disclosure, what you disclose to whom, and how you talk about it, is really important. And you can utilize your supervisor or other colleagues and kind of saying, well, "What do you think? What do you think I should say?" Because I say, once Pandora is out the box, Pandora is out the box, and sometimes we are so used to being in therapy or seeing a psychiatrist is that we want to tell it all. And I would say a bit, a lot of discretion is really important. And so again, in closing, the only difference that it makes sense is that you're entitled to a reasonable accommodation, and you have a right to one, and you can only get one if you disclose your mental health issue.

David: I want to bring up something that has been brought up in previous Ask Me Anything sessions about disclosure, and that's how you choose to do it is up to you. And if you do it verbally, make sure to follow it up with a written version, too, for trail, for what's going on with you.

LaVerne: You're absolutely right. You're absolutely right. Yes. And don't, the important thing is that when we work, we sometimes we kind of say we don't need this. I had the same issue when I went back to work after being hospitalized, and I'm like, "Oh, I don't need, I don't need to do this, I don't need to do that, I don't need to do this." And I would say it's very important to practice wellness and that those things have made you healthy, whether it's your doctor, or a certain activity, or what have you. Whatever is made is important to your overall wellness because that it's important that you continue to do that once you get a job, that we not feel that we're, that we don't need anything. And each one of you that's on the phone, the 24 folks that are on the phone, you have a good idea really what you need in order to stay well.

David: Alright. So turning to the next question. This one comes from Steven in New York, and they asked, "Is there any organization that helped ex-felons get employment as a peer support specialist? Is there anyone who can help me with resumes and cover letters?" For someone with a forensic background, I have no experience with resumes and cover letters.

LaVerne: Okay. You're fortunate to live in New York State, and because I say that because there are several, depending upon where you are living in New York State, there are several programs that train peer specialists, peers with criminal justice backgrounds to work. And generally the work is, most folks with criminal justice histories are really enthusiastic about working with folks that share our experiences. And so what happened in New York State, there's a, what we call, it's called, The Justice Center. And so it's really an agency that, once your printed, because most of it in New York, they do a background check that really, you will, the employer has to demonstrate you're being hired because of your criminal justice history, that that's viewed as an asset. You have to demonstrate your, that you're doing well in the community, and that you, and that what I found in my experience in New York State, is that it's a very, it's a process that gives you every opportunity to gain employment. I would say that there are peer agencies, for example, Howie the Harp Peer Advocacy Center in Harlem. You've got Baltic Street, which is in Brooklyn. You got lots of peer organizations, so what I would do is really contact, like Howie the Harp, I would recommend that, because they've done a lot of work around working with people with criminal justice histories and really just ask the question, where is their training program? Because it's really important for folks that are doing peer support work to really be trained, and there are loads and loads of opportunities in New York State to really, whether I'm working with an agency I've worked with, for example, a group of folks in Oasis, that's the State Alcohol and Substance Abuse Agency that really is working with every county New York City for the treatment providers to hire peers to work in the treatment court, the drug courts, the mental health courts. So things are changing, and you've got to believe that your criminal justice history is not a deficit, in many ways it's an asset. It's a demonstration of strength that you're a survivor, that you've overcome many, many, many barriers, and that whole experience rather than being viewed as negative, really has prepared you to work as a peer specialist.

David: Sure. Steven saying, it's hard, he's out on Long Island, and it's hard for him to travel. Do you know of anything out there?

LaVerne: I do. Yes. It's called, my colleague Ellen Helion, it's called, Hands Across Long Island (HALI). And David, if you could get their website, they do fantastic work in Long Island, and I would reach out to them, I really would. They do great work around helping folks with resumes, helping individuals get copies of their Rap Sheets, employment, clothing, and housing. They run a housing program, and they also have this wonderful program where they focus on primary care, health, and wellness, and it's exciting. HALI's a peer-run organization, and they have a psychiatrist that works for them, that really focuses on recovery-based practices. So it's, you're really fortunate in some ways that you have access to that wonderful organization. I want to emphasize that this is a peer-run organization that's doing all this wonderful work.

David: So in the chat box, I put the Justice Center (<https://www.justicecenter.ny.gov>), Howie the Harp (<http://www.communityaccess.org/our-work/educationajobreadiness/howie-the-harp>), Baltic Street (<http://www.balticstreet.org>), and the Hands Across Long Island (<http://www.hali88.org>) for everyone. Go ahead.

LaVerne: No, I say when you call, just tell them that you are, that LaVerne Miller recommended that you call, and hopefully get in the top of the line. But, I'm saying that jokingly, but Ellen is a colleague of mine, so I'm sure she'll treat you well.

David: You know something that kinda caught my eye that Steven says, "I didn't know they helped with ex-felons." Do you find it common for different agencies to work with ex-felons, or is it?

LaVerne: I mean, I think, yeah, I mean I think that's a wonderful question. I think it really depends on where you at. If you're in a major city, generally there are organizations that are devoted to working with individuals with felony convictions and others serious convictions. Generally there is, I would say most places, even if you're in a small town, there probably is an organization that focuses on what we call "re-entry" that when a person comes back into the community after an experience, after a period of incarceration in jail or prison, and it's real. So what you can do is I often, many jurisdictions have what's called a Re-entry Council or Re-entry Group where all the folks that are doing re-entry programs come together, and really talk about what they're doing, what their priorities are. So that will be a good place to start. And if you are not an ex-felon, I think we had to speak it into truth; and I say that if you're not an ex-felon. You are a qualified person, who is looking for a job. As long as you think that you're an ex-felon, you will, it will be difficult for you to excel. You'll wear all that on your sleeve. So don't ever characterize yourself as an ex anything, whether it's a, an ex-felon, or you're talking about, I am a person with bipolar disorder. We can't let those things define finding we are, those are things that happened to us. Those are things that we've worked hard to overcome. It's part of our

experience and we've moved forward and that's the most important thing to take away. You're not an ex-felon.

David: I'm changing gears again. Theo asks, and this is a two-parter, "What strengths are required to become a peer counselor and what training is available?"

LaVerne: I think if you're really interested in working with justice-involved peers, in other words, people who have criminal justice histories, I would call the Office of Consumer Affairs in your state. And all states have Office of Consumer Affairs that really helps coordinate the trainings and everything else that's really done in the state. You'll identify what training programs. There are some training programs that focus solely on training justice-involved peers to become specialists. For example, Pennsylvania has a wonderful forensic peer specialist training program. It's one of the best in the country, and so you get a state, like Pennsylvania or New York or California or Maryland, is doing a wonderful job where there are loads of training programs to train you to work with folks with criminal justice histories. You have other programs that have more traditional, that are more traditional certified peer specialist training programs. Many of them have actually added an additional module around working with people with criminal justice histories, like Howie the Harp. And there's a range. Unfortunately, there are some states where there is not a lot of training around working with justice-involved individuals and what their special needs are. And so really I would recommend if that training isn't available in your state, that you reach out to some of your brothers and sisters in other states and really request information resources. If you go to the STAR center, that's the consumer Supporter Special Assistance Center from the National Alliance on Mental Illness. I worked on a three-part series About Us, that's the title that really has some resources and other things that are really helpful around training programs. And David, it would be helpful if you listed the website of the Policy Research Associates because we have loads of resources that are there.

David: Getting on it right now.

LaVerne: We have loads the resources, and what I'm going to do is I will, let me see. , yeah, I did a three-part series that really focused on really the kinds of things you really need to know to be an effective peer specialists. But I will say that because there's a culture around working in jails and in working in the criminal justice settings, they're often restrictions that, I'll give you an example: Folks that are working in jail often don't know that even giving a person a piece of gum is a violation of policy. It's contraband. Well training, if you got trained, then you would understand that. They also went in jails and prisons, there are challenges. People, for those of us going to have those kinds of experiences. Folks are not accustomed to open up to anybody because to open up means that you're vulnerable, and that you can be taken advantage of. And so, it may take you some time to engage folks. Well, if you go to a training that focuses on working with individuals with criminal justice history, they'll talk about that, and you'll learn skills. The most important thing that you'll learn, and is that the vast majority of our brothers

and sisters coming out of the criminal justice system almost universally have experienced trauma. So what that does is, it helps you as a person who's gotten trained and ultimately in a criminal justice setting to really have skills about, to understand what trauma is, how it may impact the relationship building, and really be to be able to incorporate those in a strength-based way in the work that you do. But the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors did a wonderful book on, although its focus is on women, but I've recommended use for anyone. It taught, it really talks very eloquently and speaks to us around trauma. And what does trauma informed care mean to a peer, what is it that we have to do. Sherry Mead's work around intentional peer support talks to that. So I would say basically if you don't have training in closing in your community, there are all sorts of resources that you can access to make sure that you have the information that you need.

David: Sure. During that answer you mentioned on the Policy Research Associates, there's a three-part series that you did. What's the title of that for anyone who wants to look for it?

LaVerne: It's Learning About Us, and what I'll do is I will get the link now and put it in there, but okay. Or, the easiest thing to handle if you're interested in getting it. I don't know, David, how you want to manage it because right now, I don't have access to putting in a, to actually download. But if you're interested in it, in the chat box, if you just your name and your email or what have you; or if David already has it, I'd be more than glad to send it out.

David: Instead of that, if you send me a separate email, I will send, I can send that link to everyone who's registered.

LaVerne: As soon as we get off the phone? As well as something I wrote an article that talks about re-entry being part of the recovery process and that recovery must be the outcome of re-entry because it's really not just about doing your time. It's not just about succeeding in probation or parole. It's about a life in the community. It's about all the things that everyone else enjoys and feels good about, so those things are very important.

David: Sure, let's see. We're going to switch to another question here, and we'll go to Jackie from Utah who asked, "Many individuals with criminal justice histories do not want to have anything to do with the criminal justice system again because it re-traumatizes them. They particularly do not want to go into the jails. Have you dealt with these sorts of issues?"

LaVerne: Oh, absolutely. I mean, I've dealt with issues where the person who's working in the jail as a peer specialist often maybe working in the same court that he or she was convicted. I mean I would say that everything is local, and you never know who you're going to run into that you had those experiences. I would say I really recommend the folks to be very careful about and deliberate about what kinds of setting they are going, that they are applying for a position for. For example, if you know that your experience in jail or prison was a bad one and that you kind of, it's not something that you would want to revisit, that's entirely fine. Not everybody

can work every place. There are multiple settings where peer specialists can work, and I'll forward that to David as well. You can work in a crisis stabilization unit, respite programs, you can be a co-responder to work with the police when they respond to a 911 call, you can also work in a medication assisted treatment program where you're helping a person navigate through that whole piece of being on Methadone or other medication-assisted treatment and really support them through their journey. So there are infinite amount of opportunities for folks to work, and it doesn't have to be someplace where you don't want to work, and I recommend to everyone be very, very mindful of it. It's a decision that can really impact on your future.

David: And Steven again has been active in the chat, and he mentions that he was offered a job, but backed out at the last minute due to fear. **How do you manage your own personal fears and stigma?**

LaVerne: Okay. First of all, you have to own it. And the other thing is that's really important is not only owning it, but having someone that you can talk through it and that you can, and that you feel empowered. This is the worst thing in the world is to feel that life is going to happen to you, not that you're going to take, to have control over your life. So I'd say that that's really, really very important. The other thing is to really understand where that fear is coming from and to really identify it as a priority for you own personal and professional development. Often fear comes from a place that we don't even know where it comes from. I'll give you an example. I've worked with, when I worked with provider agencies or criminal justice setting, I always say, people with criminal justice system histories have sustained enormous losses: family, social status in the community, a job. People grieve, and that grief process, unless people are able to deal with it, results in a lot of fear. It really does because you just don't know where you fit in or what you can do. And so it's really, and as long as your heart is troubled, there's no medication, there's no activity, there's no anything that can do that. You've got to, what I say, you've got to heal yourself. And as part of that, and part of that healing process will help you gain the confidence. The other thing is do an internship. Folkstone when I ran, Howie the Harp center, everyone is not prepared to go to employment, right away. So, do internship. Where you able to adjust to work and, know that you can do it and you can do it well, and that you meet colleagues and that you go to lunch, and that you do all those things. I really recommend the folks, if there's some ambivalence that you have or concerns, try an internship or volunteer somewhere.

David: All of this advocacy for yourself really kind of brings up the question, **those who do have family in their lives or friends who want to help out, what is the best thing they can do? How can they be involved?**

LaVerne: Family, how can family be involved? I think it's really important for family to support individuals' desire to work, and to really be a cheerleader. Often families are concerned about, whether, what work will do, particularly if you're stable and you're doing well, and people think

that employment is not part of the recovery process. Well, Larry Davidson, who's a psychiatrist with a history of lived experience, like all of us, says "No, employment is recovery." That we know that having some something to do, a life of purpose, getting out of poverty, having relationships, children is really important. That's what we all want to do. Notwithstanding the challenges that we have. So, I think it's incumbent upon family to really support. But the flip side of that is, many of us don't have families that are supportive, that we don't even necessarily want to be around. So I always say, look at the family as a range, and that family is how you define it. Those people want conditionally will support you, and then really lean on them for the kinds of support that you need. The other thing is you may want family to work with you. For example, if you're a woman or a male, and you have a child and that child has to be picked up from daycare at 3:00 or half a day kindergarten, and you need someone to pick up your son or daughter, I think it's really, family can step in, family can be an asset. So often I recommend, sit down with your family and say, "This is what I need from all of you in order to succeed." And really be clear about what you need, and move forward. And if you're, and that doesn't have to be your family of origin, it can be your community family, your church family, you church or your synagogue or your mosque family, people that really care about you and that you care about.

David: Philippe in the box, says "In my case, church was the first step to get help, but God was the final step to get hope and help."

LaVerne: Yeah, spirituality is important, David, it's critical. And we all know, and I think it's important to stress, that people believe different things, but being, having spirituality and really understanding being a person that is able to draw upon that strength in times of distress or when things come at us, that we're prepared for, is really important. So thank you very much for that comment.

David: Yeah. Cindy from Illinois. She says, "We have had several concerns expressed from individuals providing peer services when they were former consumers at the agency. And that transition being difficult for both persons served and staff. Do you have any solutions to address this?"

LaVerne: I do, and I want to put this out there. I'm not really a big fan over that because I think it's very difficult to make that transition around, and it's around being a consumer to provider in the same agency. And a lot of the time, it's not our issue, it's the folks that we work with who know, may know very intimate things about you and may have drawn conclusions. But be that as it may, there are really important reasons why a program they want to hire someone that's seen, that went to the program, you're a role model, you already have preexisting relationships, and you may know what the agency is about. What I recommend is requesting that your file, your personal, your medical files not be accessible at all to anyone, that they'd be off limits because folks get curious and they go and look. So I think that's primary, and your privacy is critical. And so, it's really important in agencies to do everything they can to protect privacy.

The other thing that you can do is really, have your supervisor really work with the other supervisors to really speak to staff about how important it is to maintain privacy. And sometimes the adjustment is a long time, but it's worth doing if you want to get back to the community that really helped you on your road to recovery, which is the way a lot of us feel.

David: Yeah. For anyone listening, we have about 10 minutes left. And so if you want to ask a question, now is the time to ask it. So where I see Rachel saying, is there a way to ask a question? Yes. Now, so go ahead and type your question now, and we'll get to you right after we do this next one.

LaVerne: But David, can I just say one thing? I'm not really an endorser of someone working for an agency where you're currently receiving services unless it's a large agency and there's a, you don't have to work in the program that you went through. I mean, I treat that a little differently than someone who used to be a "client." And so, you want to look at it through two kinds of different lenses. And Mr. Kugler, you can speak it if you want to ask a question, come on. I want to hear your voice. This is great questions.

David: This is, this is Rachel's. So this is a different person. So as Rachel types her question, Christina from Florida, and this is a question with some explanation. "How do you get around a Level Two background check required by states and feds? In Florida, we have many justice-involved peers who cannot work with the public because they can't pass a background check. There is an exemption process, but it is challenging and sometimes triggering or traumatizing and the decision seems to be arbitrary."

LaVerne: That's something, someone's got their dog. I mean, that's something I've heard time and time again, and it really depends on the state where you live. It depends on whether your state has really gone through a reform process, like New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Maine, California, so it's really state specific. And Florida typically, their laws are a little bit different, let's say, than the states that I just mentioned. The process, as an attorney, I just want to explain that employers, agencies are given quite a bit of leeway in developing policies and practices that they feel remote, that they promote the job, the goals. And one of the issues is that they're most concerned about peers working with what they call vulnerable populations, when the peer has a criminal justice record. If you have an exemption process, I would really recommend identifying a legal aid society, the Bar Association, or consumer-run program, bringing people together to help folks in the meantime, complete that exemption process. Because often you do need someone with some expertise, as David said earlier to say the right words. The other thing is advocate, motivate, bring it to the issues, speak to you state senators, your local senators, your assembly, your local mayor, bring it up to people's attention because often, and I'm going to end it, people don't, no one goes back and looks at laws until it impacts on them. So you have to remember that a lot of these policies, regulations, and practices, came at a time where the public was, punish people. You do the crime, you do the time. We have done a really markedly shift. And so often laws or regulations that are inconsistent with that

shift never get changed because no one ever thinks to enact a law that changes it. So you can be a change agent, advocate.

David: Great. I think that kind of transitions to the next question that Rachel has shared with us, and Rachel writes, "I'm an attorney that works at an organization that provides free legal services to low-income people with mental health conditions. And we are fortunate enough to have peers on staff. What is the best way to provide constructive criticism or feedback to peers we work with, without re-traumatizing them or making them feel like their work isn't valued? Again, this is an issue I've struggled with as a manager."

LaVerne: Okay. I'm going to start backwards for us. First of all, we're not like Humpty Dumpty eggshells where we're going to crack if we get constructive criticism. And I see my colleague Jonathan Edwards on the line, Jonathan and I've worked together over the years to really ensure that that whole supervision piece is really understood by the supervisor. And I know Jonathan, if you were on the phone, if you want to chime in about your approach to supervision of peers. But I will say is that supervision should be structured, but it's binary, where both you and the peer you supervising talk about what's going on and really problem solve together because that's critical. I say, I've learned that water sinks to the lowest level, and people will always exceed it downward. So it's really important for you to set reasonable expectations, but also to give the person the tools, the resources and support that they need in order to succeed because the often that doesn't happen. And the other thing is really, it's important for you not to take on the role of being a therapist or a psychiatrist. It's important that we are able, that we don't, that our employees or our supervisors don't become that. That once you're employed that you do what everyone else does in the community that you get those services in your community where basically you're able to talk about what's going on without your employer knowing all the details. So in closing, I would ask the peer very clearly what does he or she feel that he or she needs for supervision? And I always say supervision when you're providing constructive criticism is critical to say something positive. You can say, we all can say something positive about someone. So really it's important to really, to say something positive. I know I need that supervision, but I'm not, that something happened and I'm gonna, that it's a challenge. But that's my recommendation, and there are loads of resources and I'll send them to David around peer supervision. I have some slides that David, excuse me not David, that Jonathan did for non-peers of supervising peers.

David: Thank you. And hopefully that's useful to you. Rachel. I'll close with one last question and that question is, "How do you deal with setbacks when doors are closed, if you, because of your background?"

LaVerne: Yeah, that's a hard one, and I can relate it to my own personal experience. I was an attorney that practiced law. I was a prosecutor, and when I got sick and hospitalized, it was clear that that was not going to be my career path anymore. That the stressors and other kinds of things and some things that happened during the term, during my employment that it was

not going to be an option. When you deal with, when one door opens, closes another one, opens up, setbacks are a part of life. Sometimes things happen, having absolutely nothing to do with the fact that we are, that we may have a criminal justice history or that we have a substance abuse history or a mental health history. It's important that for every setback that you step back and you look at kind of what you could maybe do differently in that process. But most importantly is really to number one, the whole wellness piece. Because we know when we get setbacks, it's like, if you're like me, I start what I call stinking thinking. I'm not, then I'm not worthy. But the other thing is to create, to live in your community. There are things that can enrich your life, make you feel good about yourself, connect you with folks that can really provide support that when those kinds of disappointments come, you're much able to better to handle it. Because think about your own experience, and everyone on the phone, when did you most have the biggest challenge in handling the setback? That was when we were isolated, when we felt all alone, and so it's really important. For example, Jonathan is a great colleague of mine, and often when I've had experiences that have left me sad, disappointed, feeling like a failure, I pick up the phone and I call Jonathan, and we talk and he talks me through it, like the boxing, like the corner in a boxing ring. You can do it, you can do it, and I think we have to do that for each other. I don't know if that analogy was a good one, but we have to do it for each other, and that's what I think I'll close on is that we're a wonderful community. Your criminal justice experience or your mental health and substance use history does not define you. It doesn't. They're going to be times when you experience stigma and discrimination, but don't internalize that. It's not your problem, it's other folks' problems. But the most important thing is to really get involved politically in your communities to be visible. We can't afford to be invisible that people forget about us, and don't think about things that impact our lives, like poverty, access to mental health care or substance use treatment, access to anything; all the things that we want that makes us happy and feel fulfilled. So, if you've got things that are going on in your state or locality that you feel are discriminatory or really impact on justice-involved folks, get together, group organized, strategize, and speak to power. That's important.

David: LaVerne, thank you for sharing your knowledge and experiences and thoughts with us today. That brings us to the end of this session of Ask Me Anything about Employment. And for anyone who's joined us, you'll receive the announcements about upcoming ones by email and the survey in the coming weeks. Again, thank you everyone for joining us, and I hope you have a great day.

LaVerne: And enjoy fall. I think it's coming for those of you that are the East coast. Thanks so much, David, for the opportunity. Bye everyone.