



TN Department of
**Mental Health &
Substance Abuse Services**

Collegiate Recovery Ambassador Project

FY23-24 Report

Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services &

University of Tennessee, Knoxville – Rocky Top Recovery

June 2024



Introduction & Background

In 2022, the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (TDMHSAS) started discussions with the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK) regarding a pilot to bring student voice and action to the Knoxville campus that would align with the Collegiate Recovery Initiative. The Collegiate Recovery Initiative aims to connect with colleges across the state of Tennessee to provide training, resources, and contacts for students in need of behavioral health support, with the goal of campuses becoming recovery friendly. Initial implementation entailed identifying Recovery Ambassadors, current students in recovery from mental health and/or substance use disorders, to begin efforts toward decreasing stigma, increasing student knowledge, creating access to recovery friendly events, and building support groups on campus.

FY23 Project Implementation and Outcomes

Implementation

The first year of the project, though the contract was between TDMHSAS and UTK, for the Knoxville campus, the UT SMART Initiative had administrative oversight. The Executive Director was charged with initial implementation and identification of the Recovery Ambassadors. In the budget there was funding for the Executive Director along with at least four (4) ambassadors with specifications of at least one (1) of them having to be a graduate student and the rest being undergraduate students. The rest of the budget included funding for trainings, conferences, and supplies. The Executive Director of the UT SMART Initiative provided oversight of each of the events and social media campaigns produced by the Ambassadors. They were also responsible for direct oversight and supervision of the Ambassadors. The Ambassadors themselves were responsible for coming up with the social media campaigns, building relationships across campus, setting up tabling and recovery focused events on campus, and creating recovery support groups.

Goals

There were six (6) project goals that complimented the overarching goal of the creation of the Ambassador pilot. The six project goals were:

- 1) Decrease stigma associated with substance use and mental health disorders.
- 2) Create a brand for the Recovery Ambassador Program.
- 3) Increase student knowledge on recovery and resiliency as it relates to mental health, substance use, and suicide prevention.

- 4) Increase access to recovery friendly events for students as it relates to mental health and substance use.
- 5) Increase the number of recovery support groups on campus.
- 6) Develop long-standing partnerships to identify current or future students who would benefit from recovery resources.

First Year Accomplishments

Within the first several months of the project, four (4) Recovery Ambassadors (Ambassadors) were onboarded, and Rocky Top Recovery (RTR) was established. Through the first year of the project, continued development, and exposure of RTR was a key focus, including the creation of a logo to help identify the brand. The brand was used on all social media/marketing posts, tabling events, and flyers to market the various events hosted or facilitated by the Ambassadors.



In the first year there were more than **78** social media posts that included personal stories, coping mechanisms, information on mental health and substance use, how to stay healthy during holidays, and more. Each of these posts had on **average 200 impressions each**. The goal with each social media post, video, and campaign was to continue to provide education to help decrease the stigma associated with mental health and substance use while also addressing the stigma of asking for help. This was coupled with seven (7) educational sessions



that included topics such as naloxone training, mental health, and recovery ally trainings. These educational sessions started laying the foundation of increasing student knowledge on recovery and resiliency.

Recovery friendly events in the first year were slow to start but by the end of the year there were six (6) events. These events included

everything from reading groups, to concerts, to an event called *From Rock Bottom to Rocky Top*. This event brought students together with a local recovery high school to paint the UT Rock and to show support for all those students who are in or recently started a recovery journey.

As it relates to the recovery support group goal, two recovery support groups were established on campus. The first called Mental Health Mondays. This group was for students struggling with mental health issues and was a place where they could go every Monday to gain support from their peers, as well as work through peer guided activities to help them cope with mental health struggles. The second group was an All-Recovery support group for those students struggling with mental health, substance use, and other addiction disorders. This group had the same philosophy while also relying heavily on open peer to peer sharing. It embodied a safe space for students to share and gain support from their peers. Both support groups were led by Ambassadors and had anywhere from 3-8 students in attendance each week.

Lastly, the Ambassadors worked hard to start building relationships on and off campus to best support students. Some of these relationships included community partners such as Elevate Recovery High School, Metro Drug Coalition, and a local “sober” bar. There were a lot of inroads created with student groups including fraternities, sororities, athletics, and other student groups with a focus on striving to meet the needs of all students. This is an area where more growth could be seen in coming years.

Lessons Learned

There were a lot of lessons learned and growth in the first year of the project, but there were a few that stood out as areas of needed growth to sustain and build upon the success of the initiative moving forward. The first lesson learned was since this was an initiative specific to the Knoxville campus **it was important to have administrative oversight from a Knoxville campus office**. This would allow for campus buy-in and better communication on space, support, and longevity of the program. The second lesson learned was **it would be beneficial to have a Collegiate Recovery Coordinator**. This position would allow for more direct supervision of the Ambassadors and provide the ability to connect one on one with students seeking support. One of the last major lessons learned is **how important it is to have a dedicated space for students**. With some of the events and the recovery meetings it was hard to find a consistent space that was easily accessible. Based on other initiatives like this one, there is a lot of positive feedback for those that have dedicated space that can be accessed by students at any time. All these lessons were considered while preparing for implementation for the second year of the project.

FY24 Project Implementation and Outcomes

Implementation

For the FY24 contract period, with the first year's lessons learned, the contract was moved within the University of Tennessee system to be implemented by the Center for Health Education & Wellness (CHEW) center on the Knoxville campus. The first order of business was to hire a Collegiate Recovery Program Coordinator. During the first few months of the transition, the CRP Coordinator was hired and worked with the Executive Director of the SMART Initiative and the Tennessee Collegiate Recovery Director, to get brought up to speed on the project and what was needed moving forward.

Goals

The goals for the second year of the project stayed relatively the same. There were two goals that had minor changes to them. The original goal of, *create a brand for the Recovery Ambassador Program*, now noted to maintain a brand versus create a brand. The original goal to *increase student knowledge on recovery and resiliency as it relates to mental health, substance use, and suicide prevention*, had an addition to include staff and faculty in with the student knowledge.

The other major difference in the scope goals was to identify a dedicated space, within the first six (6) months of the new contract, for the Ambassador project. The space would provide a place to continue to provide recovery meetings, have a safe place for students to go to when needing to feel supported on their recovery journey.

Second Year Accomplishments

During the second year, social media posts disseminated information about multiple recovery events, as well topics including mental health, substance use, how to stay relaxed during finals, along with other topics focusing on awareness and stigma reduction. In total there were **74** social media posts which averaged **167** impressions each. During this year the Ambassador team was also able to track the number of accounts reached for each post along with the number of interactions. Over the course of the year, more than 10,000 accounts were reached and close to **1,050** interactions occurred with the social media posts. There was also a greater focus on brand recognition this year. Results from two surveys conducted showed that **46%** of the students surveyed knew the Rocky Top Recovery logo and 20% knew what Rocky Top Recovery was but didn't recognize the logo.

Recovery friendly events found their rhythm in the second year of the project. There was a total of **14** various recovery friendly events. A favorite among students was the “Plant the Seed of Recovery” event where participants received mini pots with seeds to plant and watch grow over time. The underlying theme of this event emphasized that recovery starts small, with a single act, yet given the appropriate environment, it grows stronger with time. Other popular events included yoga, a concert night, sober tailgate, and a sober trivia night. The Ambassadors ensured there were a variety of events that would draw individuals into the initiative.



There was also growth in the number of educational sessions provided on campus for students and faculty. A total **20** sessions were hosted that included Recovery Ally trainings, Recovery Roundtable Series, sessions about safety and how to be empowered in recovery.

Partnerships this year focused a lot on the Student Counseling Center and the Center for Care and Resilience. Through the partnerships built, a referral pathway was created to refer students to the Rocky Top Recovery program. Another partnership developed was with the Office of Undergraduate Admission and the Transfer Center. This relationship has made a positive impact as it provides an opportunity for any transfer student reaching out to their admission counselor for mental health/substance use support and resources to be connected to the Ambassadors. New partnerships were also established with Student Conduct and Community Standards, the Veterans Success Center, and a gentleman from President Boyd’s Advisory Council who is in recovery and very passionate about ensuring Rocky Top Recovery is a success on UTK’s campus.

Lessons Learned

With the addition of a Collegiate Recovery Coordinator and transitioning the project to the Center for Health Education & Wellness Center, the project received administrative support from the campus along and saw better coordination among the Ambassadors. The Collegiate Recovery Coordinator established relationships that led to consistent engagement and referral of students from the campus counseling center to connect students with support groups. The Ambassadors responded well to having a Collegiate Recovery Coordinator, and this led to several successful events on and off-campus to garner greater student interest.

There are still a few areas that the initiative is looking to grow in. The first is UTK is continuing to work on identifying a dedicated recovery space. This has not been an easy task and will need administrative support to accomplish. The other area of focus for future years will be partnerships with other campus organizations such as the Campus Events Board, Greek life, and student groups to increase exposure and brand recognition.

Key Takeaways for a Successful Recovery Ambassador Project

Key Takeaways

There are several key takeaways that have been identified throughout the two (2) year initial years of the initiative that can help lead to a successful Recovery Ambassador Project on a college campus. The first is **dedicated space**. Throughout the initiative, not having a dedicated space for the Ambassador project has created barriers in expanding recovery support groups and having flexibility with changing days and time of the week. Not having a dedicated space has also made it challenging for students to have a place to go to where they can get in the moment support for their recovery journey. Additionally, the inconsistency that arises when having to reserve space each semester makes it hard for students to rely on a consistent location for support groups. During the last year of the project, the Collegiate Recovery Coordinator has worked on identifying key administrative positions to help secure a dedicated space. There has also been a document created to help other campuses know what to look for with a dedicated space, that document can be found here: [Space Recommendations](#). Another area is ensuring there is **administrative support** for the initiative. Often leadership will need to help make connections for the growth of the initiative, ensure policies and procedures are being followed and can help overcome challenges that may arise. A **connection to the counseling center** is a plus to ensure that students can be connected both to the Ambassador project and from the Ambassador project to the counseling center. To ensure a successful Ambassador project there needs to be integration and **collaboration with student organizations** on campus. This ensures the project grows and there is awareness in all facets of student life. Through the last two years, **increasing the types of recovery events and recovery groups** has led to an increase in participation. A variety of events and groups that happen at different times helps ensure the project is catering to the larger student body. Lastly, to be able to measure impact, it is important to ensure all events and educational sessions incorporate a pre/post survey or similar mechanism to measure impact.

Final Thoughts

The Recovery Ambassador Project is among the first of its kind, nationwide, and has garnered respect and admiration from others in the field. While many collegiate programs fund a peer support specialist, they often end up wearing many hats, becoming both admin and outreach coordinator among many other things. The Recovery Ambassador Project, along with its coordinator, are afforded the opportunity for great success because the ambassadors can focus on outreach and student engagement while the coordinator can focus on vital tasks for sustainability. Greater administrative support does more than just influence the logistics and sustainability of the program, it allows the culture to change from the top down and changes the way that young adults seek support for decades to come. The Ambassadors have started a revolution on campus, one that has begun to catch fire and receive recognition. With sustained efforts, UTK will be the leader in Tennessee where students will know without a doubt where to go and who to seek to get the support they need.

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