

The Intersection of Behavioral Health and Criminal Justice

[00:00:00] **Sarah:** The experiences I've been through, I don't wish them upon anyone, but it made me who I am today.

[00:00:06] **Jason Hibbs:** She asked me to call her Sarah on this podcast, and she shares a difficult story that she's thankful she lived to tell.

[00:00:14] **Sarah:** I grew up in a very rural area. And one of the things about rural areas is there isn't very many resources and everybody talks about everybody, but nobody says anything.

And there is so much of around anything, whether it's, Oh, somebody's got a drinking problem or is an alcoholic, or if someone is quote unquote, their terms out there, Oh, crazy or whatever. Everybody knows, but nobody talks about it, and you can't talk about it. And with that back in 1998, I was 16 years old.

And that was my first time I attempted suicide.

[00:00:55] **Jason Hibbs:** She says she felt like she had no one to talk to, and that no one understood her. But after that failed attempt, she decided to distract herself.

[00:01:04] **Sarah:** I was getting straight A's. I was involved with everything you could think of. I was the star athlete. I was the star student.

I was the good kid, the goody two shoes. Because of what I was going through and dealing with, that was the only way I could cope. And later in my life, I had different diagnoses and in and out of hospitals and a freaking flyer. I used my diagnosis as an excuse and it was just hard on family, friends, myself, and I gave into being sick and identified.

with the diagnosis. That was me. And then later, I realized I want to live.

[00:01:54] **Jason Hibbs:** For many, that realization doesn't come so quickly, and some end up in the criminal justice system. Last time we discussed opportunities for people behind bars, but opportunities alone aren't enough. People need the right mindset and mental health to change, and research shows Many in our jails are grappling with unmet mental health needs.

Welcome back to the Rethinking Jails and Justice podcast, produced by WGTE Public Media, and made possible by support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of the Safety and Justice Challenge, which seeks to reduce over incarceration by changing the way America thinks about it.

In this episode, we explore the intersection of behavioral health and criminal justice, including the new challenges facing behavioral health therapists and specialists like Sarah, who now dedicates her time to helping others get to a better place in life. She does this as a peer support specialist at a local nonprofit, but it took years of work and pain first.

[00:03:09] **Sarah:** From 05 to 2015, I've been hospitalized, I couldn't tell you how many times. It's been, I have had bipolar type 1 with psychosis, bipolar 2 PTSD, general anxiety disorder. Just so many, and then so many different medications. One after another. Every 90 days getting a med change, which isn't healthy for anyone.

[00:03:31] **Jason Hibbs:** She says it wasn't until she moved to a more populated area that she was able to get access to the resources she needed. Like a professional who took the time to find the right balance of medication and therapy for Sarah. Because mental health help.

That's really what made the difference, like someone just willing to listen, like you just haven't had that before.

[00:03:55] **Sarah:** No, because they would, like most of the time when you get hashballized, the psychiatrist will meet you with like maybe less than 15 minutes. And then, they go off of what you can say at that moment, and sometimes you're in such a dark place, you don't even know, you're like, what?

And then yeah, just someone listening to me, and having a therapist that listened. I was also diagnosed with, I'm gonna tell you how many personality disorders, like borderline, and cluster B, and sociopath, and all this other stuff, and it was like, this isn't okay. And then once we got to the real problem, oh.

Yeah, traumatic stuff. And, oh, let's just work through this. Oh my gosh, I'm standing up. And some people who know me, they're like, you are so sick. And now look at you.

[00:04:46] **Deb Flores:** When Zeph Center became the crisis center, one of the one of the desires was for the community out of the C pas report, which was what does our community need?

What does future state look was to create the diversion or the diversion concept for law enforcement. So they get a call. Someone is They might be doing public urination, public indecency, some kind of behavior that most of the storefronts don't want that in their place of business or whatnot.

They call 9 1 1, they go there, bring them to us. We have plenty of clothes. We have food. We will help find out what's going on with this person so that they can not go to jail. So we divert them from jail.

[00:05:29] **Jason Hibbs:** The Zeph Center is a Toledo area non profit that provides behavioral health and vocational services to youth and adults with severe and persistent mental illness.

Deb Flores is the Zeph Center's CEO.

[00:05:43] **Deb Flores:** We currently have a contract with the Bureau of Prisons and that is where we work with people that are in the criminal justice system, but oftentimes they could be people who have had some minor offenses that are seeking employment. We have a fatherhood program that we help connect people to employment.

Sometimes there are involvement in the criminal justice system and so we help them navigate that. Especially trying to help them find housing. Sometimes incarceration is the first roadblock to housing. Oftentimes they're not technically out of the system yet. They could be in treatment with us and it's ordered by drug court.

[00:06:21] **Jason Hibbs:** Flores says grants from the Bureau of Prisons and Lucas County cover the cost of treatment for some clients while others pay out of pocket and some can rely on Medicaid to cover the costs. She says the needs are great across the community. And not all the same.

[00:06:38] **Deb Flores:** After the pandemic, there is research that is showing that there is an increased need for mental health treatment and addiction services.

We do know that. We also know that vaccinations have decreased for young people, and we're starting to see some of the things that we eradicated come back. And so getting access to a healthcare provider, providing the information, so it's not just, One thing, people talk about the impact of social media on folks and the isolation that young people have if they're gaming, there's a connection to loot boxes and gambling And so it's not just one thing.

[00:07:21] **Jason Hibbs:** Loot boxes are in video game containers with random hidden items. Players spend real money or in game currency to get these items, which can enhance their power, competitiveness, or appearance. Now this has unsurprisingly led to concerns about children and gambling. According to a Federal Trade Commission report, video game loot boxes have been the subject of national and international scrutiny in recent years because of concerns Turns they quote, promote compulsive or gambling like behavior or use predatory tactics to encourage addictive consumer spending, particularly in children end quote.

And that's just one of the issues specialists at the Zef Center encounter and why people like Sarah are needed.

[00:08:07] **Sarah:** I volunteered with it for, a long time just facilitating groups like I did mainly I did children for a while then I moved on to adult mental health and I ever thought I'd like adult mental health.

Oh my gosh, I love it. Yeah, I'm like, I love kids. I have kids of my own, but I'm just like, I'll never go back to a kid, because for us to help in the community and help our kids, we got to help our adults.

[00:08:36] **Jason Hibbs:** As a general peer support specialist, Sarah provides guidance and support to people struggling with substance abuse, psychological trauma, or mental health disorders.

Sarah and the other peer supporters are asked to draw from their own personal experiences to help clients overcome. Peer support specialists at the ZEF Center conduct support meetings, develop recovery strategies and respond to patient emergencies. They work closely with professionals to provide counseling and rehab, acting as role models for clients facing similar difficulties.

They also emphasize authentic peer to peer relationships to reduce the risk of suicide and relapse.

[00:09:17] **Sarah:** I'm a generalist, so I have a little bit of everything, but there's some of us that are specialized.

[00:09:25] **Jason Hibbs:** Sarah says some of her fellow peer supporters at the Zeph Center specialize in particular areas, including mental health, substance use, criminal justice, and family support.

There are family peer supporters, youth peer supporters, and mental health peer supporters. Additionally, Sarah says Some peer supporters focus on dual issues like mental health and substance abuse.

[00:09:47] **Sarah:** Everyone has their own little niche, and I am so blessed that I'm able to share my niche with the agency and with the community.

[00:09:58] **Jason Hibbs:** Sarah's niche is the arts and working with groups.

[00:10:02] **Sarah:** I love doing groups. I love the arts. Whether it's visual art theater, music, dance, whatever.

[00:10:09] **Jason Hibbs:** So much she organized a five minute daily dance party just for her colleagues, now officially part of the employee self care plan.

[00:10:18] **Sarah:** You gotta have fun.

Just have fun. Enjoy yourself.

[00:10:22] **Jason Hibbs:** Grants pay her salary, but it's not just the money that motivates her to keep going.

[00:10:27] **Sarah:** I support wherever I can, where I can. Whether it's in the hallway with my coworkers, if I'm meeting with a person that receives services, or if I'm running a group in one of the locations.

It is meeting where the person is, connecting with them, and showing kindness. And how I'm going to show up for them. Yeah, it just depends on each person. Because they could have people listening, but not the way they need it listened to. It's the way they need to be listened to. Not the way how you listen.

It's what connects and that's why I love doing like the groups like especially the art the Visualizing recovery group because they can come in there and express themselves non verbally And I have gotten so many more people to open up that way and interpret What is going on with them in their piece?

Versus talking with me and that is a way of listening that is listening to them their way

[00:11:28] **Jason Hibbs:** Sarah leads by example and creates her own canvas as she encourages the others in her group to do the same.

[00:11:36] **Sarah:** Art is an extension of yourself. And what I attempt to teach, because I've learned to do it, is process art.

So I teach different techniques, and whether they throw it away at the end of group, it is their piece. It's what they want to do with it. And I always get, am I doing it right? Yes, it is your piece.

[00:11:55] **Jason Hibbs:** We have a photo of one piece of her artwork, which she says is a gift for CEO Deb Flores. It's uploaded to our website at www.wgt.org/r_jj,

[00:12:09] **Sarah:** so this is actually a process piece.

This piece is called free to grow because well, one, it looks like flowers growing under sea into the space. And that's what I love about it is because you can grow anywhere. And this just is it's the time of year where things are fresh and new and remind yourself. No matter where you're at, you can still grow and continue to grow and learn.

And I want to invoke that with everyone in this piece.

[00:12:41] **Jason Hibbs:** Sarah and her friends and colleagues at the Zeph Center are not the only ones in Lucas County trying to help people get healthier mentally and overcome addiction. I also met with Scott Silak, the executive director of the 18 member Mental Health and Recovery Services Board. of Lucas County.

[00:12:59] **Scott Sylak:** They are charged with planning, evaluating, funding, assessing the needs and collaborating with people as it relates to behavioral health services, substance use, mental health, gambling, addiction, treatment and prevention.

We didn't receive any money directly from the state. MacArthur for behavioral health services here at the Mental Health and Recovery Services Board, but virtually everything they did was in support of the individuals that we serve that also appear in the criminal justice system. Our research associated with MacArthur has shown that a disproportionate number of individuals with behavioral health needs appear in our Lucas County Jail in particular, and then are actually overrepresented in our criminal justice system.

So there's a huge overlap between the two systems.

[00:13:57] **Jason Hibbs:** According to the MacArthur Foundation, a person in the U. S. experiencing a mental health crisis is more likely to encounter law enforcement than receive the medical assistance they need. Serious mental health issues are four to six times more common in jails than in the general population, and 83 percent of people in jail with mental health issues did not receive treatment after admission.

SILAC says to help reverse the trend in Lucas County, they've implemented what's called a High Utilizer Review. A reviewer simply looks out for repeat offenders to try to help them find and solve the root of the problem, which is often a mental

[00:14:42] **Scott Sylak:** or behavioral health issue. That's direct contact with an individual a team of individuals in the jail, reaching out to people who are booked in the jail and held, because if you've done your research around MacArthur, you know that a great many people that are being booked in the jail are released within 24 hours.

Those people that are being held in the jail oftentimes have more serious behavioral health needs. They need a different level of intervention.

[00:15:08] **Jason Hibbs:** SILAC also says the expansion of the Opportunity Project, initially funded by the MacArthur Foundation through the Toledo Legal Aid Society and the Public Defender's Office, also helps reduce the number of defendants going through the jail's revolving door.

[00:15:23] **Scott Sylak:** They act as representatives of the Public Defender's Office, which then builds that rapport and relationship, and then they provide some support for that person to connect to services and other, entitlement benefits, so that person can get supported and, then puts them in a better position as well to respond to any court mandates that might come down the road because of their criminal justice involvement.

[00:15:47] **Jason Hibbs:** Netta Abasi is a program officer on the criminal justice team at the MacArthur Foundation.

[00:15:53] **Nida Abbasi:** I think there's a lot of places around the country that can see themselves in Lucas County.

[00:15:59] **Jason Hibbs:** Abasi says Lucas County's unique approach of bringing a social worker into the public defender's office is something other

communities could consider as a way to humanize a tough experience for people struggling with behavioral health needs.

[00:16:14] **Nida Abbasi:** It's Scary for someone coming into the criminal justice system, especially if they have needs that aren't going to be met traditionally like substance use or mental health. So thinking about that and actually employing someone who could be helpful for that population.

[00:16:32] **Jason Hibbs:** SILAC also says the expansion of the electronic monitoring made it easier for the board to connect people to the mental health resources they need and stay connected, because defendants are able to travel to see mental health professionals and not being incarcerated means they get to keep Medicaid for themselves.

Which covers the cost of treatment.

[00:16:52] **Scott Sylak:** So they don't actually have a break in treatment. If they were in treatment or able to get in treatment and through the use of electronic monitoring, then you can see where they're at and are they going to treatment, and forces that issue a little more.

There's savings there. There's opportunity savings in that whole process that we can then translate into long term sustainability. And This is a very high priority population for our community. Our board has identified us as saying one of our goals is to reduce the penetration of individuals in the criminal justice system.

If we, if one of our people find, enters jail, we don't want them to go any farther. right? So what kind of strategies can we put around these folks to support them so they don't go any farther so they don't end up in the state prison? As

[00:17:41] **Jason Hibbs:** we mentioned previously, law enforcement says current jail staff are being trained on how to better handle inmates mental health issues.

But SILAC says the new jail itself will be a big game changer.

[00:17:53] **Scott Sylak:** a 24 bed medical unit for behavioral health services. So there will be on site, full time services in the jail for people experiencing behavioral health issues, both substance use and mental health. There will also be a connection out into the community for those individuals.

And, we can do some of that stuff now, but getting treatment in the current jail is hit or miss. That won't be the case under the new jail. And we'll be able to have that continuity care,

[00:18:23] **Jason Hibbs:** such as medication assisted therapies to help people stop using. SILAC also points to the week long 40 hour training for Lucas County Law Enforcement on available community resources for people in crisis and training on de escalation techniques.

[00:18:41] **Scott Sylak:** Law enforcement officers have said for years that their job is changing, right? They they need more social service skills, they're not counselors, right? And we're not trying to make them counselors, we're just trying to, give them some tools so that they can stay safe and they can, help the individuals that they come in contact with be safe as well.

[00:19:00] **Jason Hibbs:** But are the officers really using those tools? And do officers who receive this training arrest a lower percentage of people than they did before? SILAC isn't sure.

[00:19:11] **Scott Sylak:** Oh yeah, we don't have any kind of access to that. It would be very interesting to see that. I can tell you anecdotally from our officers that are trained, and we have over 1, 600 officers and associated law enforcement personnel trained in the CIT that they overwhelmingly see a benefit to it and have said it not only has it changed the way they communicate in the field with individuals, but it also changed the way they communicate with their families because they learn these skills that are transported across their life continuum.

[00:19:46] **Jason Hibbs:** Finally, Silak says he knows most people in Lucas County are simply not aware of the available resources, so he advises people to use the Lucas County Local Help Now app. which has a crisis phone line, emotional support line, and links to support, treatment, housing, and employment services. We have that app on our website, [www. wgte. org forward slash rjj](http://www.wgte.org/forward/slash/rjj). Despite information about community resources being at our fingertips, many people still don't know what help is out there. And it's not just that people aren't aware of this app, but therapist Erin Wiley says it's because we don't talk to each other as much as we used to.

[00:20:31] **Erin Wiley:** But yeah, people have a mistrust of people they don't know. There's community has been abolished. If I can, I don't think anyone really does. People think this, but the higher ups, like if you could create a society where you're going to keep people broken, stuck in poverty and wealthy

people can continue to make more and more money, you would dissolve community because then everyone's isolated and they're depressed, lonely, alone.

So then they overeat, stay on social media and doom scroll. They're hopeless. They're helpless. They don't believe there's any change. So they. It's break. The breakdown of community is huge.

[00:21:05] **Jason Hibbs:** Wiley is the owner of the Willow Center, an area counseling center, providing services for individuals of all ages, couples and families.

Wiley says they do not see people who are court ordered or involved in the criminal justice system. She hopes to help people before things get that far. And often, all it takes is listening.

[00:21:25] **Erin Wiley:** Primary and central to the human existence, you just have a person who sees who you are, knows that you're there, and gives you the grace and the love of acknowledging your presence and hearing you and not dismissing you.

[00:21:39] **Jason Hibbs:** It's a skill that apparently isn't easy for many of us to master, but one Zeph Center Peer Support Specialist, Sarah, possesses and uses every day. You don't like all the diagnosis talk.

[00:21:51] **Sarah:** No, they're people. We're people. Connection. People need to just go, Hey, how are you? Oh, I'm fine. Okay, that's fine. Then the next day, What's going on?

Or find a way to connect with one another. That's the biggest thing. Talk. It's okay to talk. That's what matters. It doesn't matter if it's a text, a phone call, talk. Hey, you're there. I'm here. Okay. That's all we need to know. That's all we need is kindness and the connection.

[00:22:28] **Jason Hibbs:** But how do we do that for a loved one if we fear saying something might push them away or make matters worse?

Zeph Center CEO, Deb Flores.

[00:22:38] **Deb Flores:** Those are some of the calls I get the most about. I have a loved one who is suffering from alcoholism. They have untreated mental

health condition. How do I help them navigate this? And I think this is the hardest part about being human, that they have to want the recovery themselves.

And so I think that knowing that there's a lot of family support groups in our community, attending Al Anon meetings to really understand the disease. and what the challenges are. And so I think as much education and family support that we can get people, even in our gambling addiction program we're funded in a way that we can support the family because if it's my family member, Medicaid's not going to pay for my therapy session, but it is funding to help the family understand the gambling addiction and what they can do to help support the person or to have some boundaries with that individual.

[00:23:37] **Jason Hibbs:** Sarah simply calls that showing up for others. And at the end of our interview, she gave me a list of 200 positive words and phrases to remind me to stay upbeat and confident. And then this unexpected challenge. Anything else you think we should talk about?

[00:23:54] **Sarah:** How will you show up today?

[00:23:57] **Jason Hibbs:** Me personally?

[00:23:58] **Sarah:** Yeah, what do you want to reflect to show?

[00:24:03] **Jason Hibbs:** What do you mean by that? What does that mean?

[00:24:04] **Sarah:** Yeah, it means how will you show up today and what do you want people to see you with your actions and what you reflect to others?

peace, compassion, kindness, love, anger, frustration. All those are okay, but how are you going to show up today? We

[00:24:33] **Jason Hibbs:** have a link to the Lucas County Local Help Now app, a photo of Sarah's artwork, and the 200 positive words and phrases on My Refrigerator. And, on our website at www.wgte.org/forward/slash/rjj.

Thank you for listening. The Rethinking Jails and Justice podcast is produced by WGTE Public Media and made possible by support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of the Safety and Justice Challenge, which seeks to reduce over incarceration by changing the way America thinks about and uses jails.

I'm your host. Jason Hibbs.

On the next Rethinking Jails and Justice podcast.

[00:25:28] **Nida Abbasi:** The criminal justice system is inherently a racist system, in my opinion, and that's not going to go away with a few years of funding.

[00:25:43] **Jason Hibbs:** Racial realities.

Racism is a common thing. Like we don't want to talk about it. We always say it is something else, but at the end of the day, racism plays a huge part to this.

There is still uneven balance inside disparity inside of these county jails with races, minorities make up the majority of people incarcerated. Although you look around Lucas County, there's only a small percentage of us. It's sad.

[00:26:12] **Jason Hibbs:** It's wrong. How community leaders of color are creating changes within local communities of color.

Start thinking about what we can be doing on our end. And a plea to county commissioners on the next podcast.