

Hello and welcome,

I have been serving as a direct care worker at Open sky community services since 2016. I work in a young adult residential facility that serves up to 11 individuals aged 18 to 25. We are a non restraint program. Prior to that, I served as an outreach specialist working with homeless individuals in Worcester.

I would like to thank everyone for the opportunity to speak and for being here today. While there may not be a perfect way to handle the situations we are faced with on a daily basis, having a continuing dialogue on best practices and sharing our strategies is critical to ensuring staff safety.

For my piece of this panel I will be focusing on the importance of supervision as a part of that safety.

When I first entered the field never having done direct care work, I served doing mental health outreach for homeless individuals in Worcester. I had been working with one of the individuals I served for a few months and over the month up to this incident he had been experiencing an increase in symptoms. The individual was no longer able to meet at our building and was limited in his willingness to engage outside of his camp. He had lost a lot of weight and was not engaging in much of his treatment. He called to inform us on a Friday evening in November that he had no food for the weekend. Due to the physical and psychological symptoms he was experiencing, he would be unable to get food over the weekend. Through the resources I had at the office I gathered some foodstuffs and went to my supervisor.

I explained the situation and asked for a second staff to go with me as my field partner was out. It was then that he presented me with the choice: I could either deliver the food alone because no other staff was available and he had to finish his office work or I could take someone with me on Monday and the individual would have to wait out the weekend.

This brought into question something that I think all of us on this panel and many others in the field have faced; if I set this limit, if I decline to complete this task, if I put my safety first, am I failing at my job? Does being too uncomfortable to do this mean I don't have enough grit to work in human services?

Without proper supervision, being young and believing in my own ability to keep myself safe, I went against my gut and went into the field alone. I met the individual behind an isolated industrial park by a bridge that separated the park from the grassy area that held his camp. When I arrived it was dark and raining, I rolled down my window and handed over the food. The individual was extremely disregulated

and tearful and tried on multiple occasions to get into my vehicle despite my requests otherwise. I did what I could to verbally deescalate the individual and was able to eventually roll up my window and drive away, thankful that my doors were locked.

I was left feeling uncomfortable and unsafe and there was no clear resolution to the position I was left in.

This experience influenced how I approached the field both as an individual and as someone who now supervises and leads others. It also left me very cognizant of how much people new to the field rely on their supervisors to guide them. To validate them when they have to set limits, to continue to emphasize that doing this job does not mean compromising your personal well being. I established a mantra I still say to myself and co workers alike. "I can not do my best work if I do not feel safe." The bottom line is if I am feeling unsafe, uncomfortable, and vulnerable then my attention cannot be fully on the interventions I provide to the individuals we serve and I will not be able to provide the quality of intervention that my individuals deserve.

When the time came for me to seek a new full time position I wanted to make sure I found an agency that shared my values in addition to prioritizing supervision and a collaborative approach to providing services.

I found this at Open Sky Community Services, formerly the Bridge of Central Massachusetts. At Open Sky we use the Yale Supervision Model which includes biweekly one on one supervision, group supervisions, and learning communities for supervisors where the dialogue around best practices and how to manage the safety of staff and individuals is able to be consistently addressed in a collaborative way. This is critical to the quality of services we provide and to maintaining the quality of our workplace environment for providers.

Before I close I would also like to note another value of Open Sky that provides an additional venue for this dialogue and that is the importance of collaborating with community emergency services including local police, fire, and psychiatric emergency services. Maintaining these relationships and open lines of communication allows for more fluid intervention when incidents escalate. In a program that does not utilize physical restraints calling 911 allows for interventions that can alter the course of a given incident. I always tell members of my team that leadership will always stand behind them if they make that call because as an agency and as a supervisor I would rather have a conversation with local EMS than see a staff or individual come to harm.

In conclusion I look forward to hearing from my fellow panelists and answering your questions so that together we can collaborate on and come away with new ideas on best safety practices. Thank you.