



Substance Use Disorder (SUD) Community of Practice (CoP) Meeting

July 15, 2026

12:00 – 1:30 p.m. Virtual

Meeting Summary

Background

On July 15, 2026, the Minnesota Substance Use Disorder (SUD) Community of Practice (CoP) convened virtually to begin Quarter 3's exploration of the intersection between the corrections system and the SUD ecosystem. Building on previous work examining co-occurring disorders, the meeting focused on understanding how justice involvement impacts substance use, recovery, treatment access, housing stability, and long-term wellbeing.

The session combined lived experience, cross-system perspectives, and small-group discussion to deepen participants' understanding of how individuals with SUD encounter and navigate the corrections system. Through a lived experience story, an innovation panel, and breakout conversations, participants explored opportunities to strengthen coordination between corrections, treatment, public health and community-based supports.

Attendance

Eighty 95 participants attended virtually.

Meeting Objectives

- Deepen shared understanding of the intersection between the corrections system and the SUD ecosystem.
- Identify how justice involvement disrupts recovery across systems, including treatment, housing, relationships, and personal safety.
- Highlight opportunities to improve coordination between corrections and SUD systems at both the county and state levels.

Welcome and Setting the Context for Q3 (Stephanie Devitt, SDK Strategic Services)

Stephanie welcomed participants and reviewed the Shared Vision, Community Agreements, and expectations for participation in the CoP.

Stephanie provided context for the July Community of Practice session and outlined how the quarter's work will focus on the relationship between substance use disorders and the corrections system. She reviewed Community of Practice standards and introduced the topic as an opportunity to examine the ways that criminal justice involvement intersects with prevention, treatment, recovery, housing, and community supports.

The discussion was framed around understanding the corrections system as one component of the broader SUD ecosystem and identifying where greater coordination across systems can improve outcomes for individuals and families.

Lived Experience Story: Niizhoogaabawiikwe Shabaiash

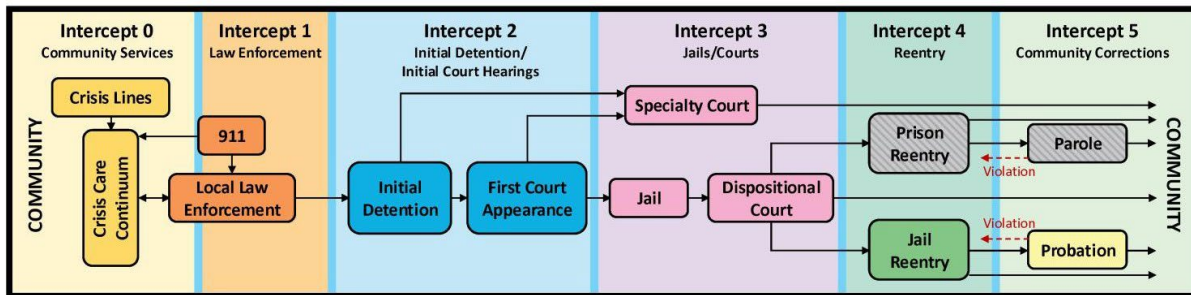
Niizhoogaabawiikwe Shabaiash shared her lived experience navigating both substance use and involvement with the corrections system. Her story highlighted the complex ways in which substance use, justice involvement and recovery intersect in individuals' lives.

The discussion explored how involvement with the corrections system can create additional barriers to recovery, including challenges related to employment, housing, community reintegration, stigma, and access to supportive services. Niizhoogaabawiikwe's reflections provided an important foundation for the subsequent panel discussion and breakout conversations by illustrating the real-world impacts of system fragmentation and the importance of coordinated, person- and culture-centered support.

Innovation Panel: Preventing Justice Involvement

Following the lived experience presentation, participants heard from a panel of professionals representing different points of intersection between substance use disorders and the justice system. The panel was structured using the Sequential Intercept Model to explore opportunities for intervention before and during justice-system involvement, specifically Intercept 0 and Intercept 1 in the graph below.

Sequential Intercept Model



Panelists included:

- **Jenilee Telander**, Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Unit, Minnesota Department of Health
- **Karin Nitzorski**, Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Unit, Minnesota Department of Health
- **Carol LaFleur**, Metro Transit Police Department Homeless Action Team
- **Stephanie Morphew**, Lead Treatment Court Coordinator, Duluth Recovery Court

Panelists discussed their roles within the broader system and shared perspectives on where individuals with SUD most commonly encounter the justice system, factors that contribute to justice involvement, examples of successful interventions, and common disruptions in care experienced by individuals moving through corrections-related systems.

The conversation highlighted the importance of early intervention, diversion strategies, treatment courts, coordinated system responses, and cross-sector partnerships aimed at preventing incarceration and improving recovery outcomes.

After the Innovation Panel, participants were asked to self-select into different breakout rooms hosted by the meeting's speakers partnered with SDK facilitators. Participants were able to join the panelist or topic they resonated most with, including:

- **Public Health and Upstream Prevention (MDH + Clay County Public Health)**

- **Addressing Root Causes with Referrals (Metro Transit Police Department)**
- **Recovery Court as an Alternative to Incarceration (Duluth Recovery Court)**
- **Navigating Systems while Preserving Culture & Pursuing Recovery (Lived Experience)**

Below are summaries of each of the panelist's presentations as well as identified themes pulled from each of the smaller breakout room discussion groups.

Panelist Summaries and Breakout Room Discussion Themes

Minnesota Department of Health: Public Health and Upstream Prevention (Karin Nitzorski and Jenilee Telander)

Representing the Minnesota Department of Health's Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Unit, Karin Nitzorski and Jenilee Telander discussed how prevention efforts can reduce substance use, mental health challenges, suicide risk and justice-system involvement before individuals enter the corrections system. Their work is grounded in a shared risk and protective factor approach, recognizing that many of the factors that contribute to substance use disorders, mental health challenges and justice involvement overlap and can be addressed through coordinated community-based prevention strategies.

The presenters described a braided and collective approach that emphasizes collaboration across sectors, local leadership, and community-driven solutions. Through a statewide grant program, MDH has awarded eight grants ranging from approximately \$100,000 to \$125,000 to support prevention initiatives tailored to local community needs. Central to the program is the belief that communities are best positioned to identify local challenges and develop culturally relevant solutions.

As an example, Karin highlighted work underway in Clay County, where coalition partners are implementing strategies focused on youth wellbeing, connectedness, and suicide prevention. One partner, the West Central Regional Juvenile Center, has integrated suicide risk assessments and juvenile justice trainings focused on Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) suicide prevention techniques. The coalition has also funded equipment and resources that promote physical activity, connection, and safety for vulnerable youth.

A significant theme of the presentation was the importance of peer-to-peer approaches. Clay County and other grantees are training young people to become peer leaders who can provide presentations about 988, promote mental health awareness, reduce stigma, recognize signs of distress, and foster conversations about wellbeing among their peers. MDH staff noted that many communities are finding peer-led strategies particularly effective because they leverage trusted relationships and create opportunities for youth engagement and leadership.

Throughout the discussion, Karin and Jenilee emphasized that prevention, intervention and recovery should not operate as separate systems. Instead, they described ongoing efforts to de-silo work across behavioral health, substance use prevention, suicide prevention, and community support systems by increasing coalition capacity, strengthening partnerships, and aligning funding and services around common protective factors such as resilience, connectedness, positive coping skills, and supportive adult relationships.

MDH Breakout Room Discussion Themes

1. Prevention Requires Building Protective Factors Early

Participants emphasized that prevention efforts should focus not only on reducing risk factors, but also on strengthening the conditions that help individuals thrive. Connectedness to supportive adults, positive peer relationships, resilience, community engagement, and healthy coping skills were identified as critical protective factors that can reduce the likelihood of substance use, mental health challenges, suicide risk, and future justice involvement.

2. Peer-to-Peer Approaches Are Effective and Underutilized

A recurring theme was the value of peer leadership and peer-to-peer education. Participants discussed how youth often respond more positively to messages delivered by trusted peers than by institutions or professionals. Programs that equip young people to speak about mental health, wellness, and available supports were viewed as promising strategies for reducing stigma and increasing engagement.

3. Stigma Remains a Significant Barrier

Participants noted that stigma continues to affect how communities talk about mental health, substance use, and suicide. Discussions highlighted the importance of changing language, promoting hope-centered messaging,

and creating opportunities for open conversation. Participants identified stigma reduction as an essential component of both prevention and recovery efforts.

4. Community-Led Solutions Are Critical

Breakout discussions reinforced that local communities are often best positioned to understand their own needs and develop meaningful responses. Participants described the importance of community-driven planning, culturally responsive approaches, and partnerships that reflect local strengths and priorities. Several examples demonstrated how local coalitions can bring together schools, juvenile justice systems, healthcare providers, and community organizations around shared goals.

5. Greater Awareness of Available Resources Is Needed

Participants discussed gaps in public awareness of prevention and crisis resources, particularly 988. Findings shared from community listening sessions suggested that many individuals remain unfamiliar with available supports or misunderstand when and how those resources can be used. Increasing education and visibility of these services was identified as an ongoing need.

6. Systems Benefit from Greater Coordination and Braided Approaches

Participants highlighted the need to reduce silos between prevention, intervention, treatment, recovery, and community support systems. Discussions emphasized the value of braided funding, coordinated coalitions, and cross-sector partnerships that address substance use, mental health, and suicide prevention through a shared framework. Participants noted that individuals experience these issues as interconnected challenges, making integrated solutions more effective than isolated approaches.

Metro Transit Police Department: Addressing Root Causes with Referrals (Carol LaFleur)

Carol LaFleur of the Metro Transit Police Department shared how the Homeless Action Team (HAT) works to prevent individuals with substance use disorders from becoming further involved in the justice system by addressing the underlying causes of instability, including homelessness, untreated substance use, and lack of community support. As a member of the Ojibwe community, Carol emphasized the importance of culturally responsive services, relationship-building, and meeting people where they are.

Carol described the Homeless Action Team as a partnership-based model that connects individuals with housing, treatment, case management, and other supports based on their self-identified needs and goals. Rather than applying a uniform approach, the team works with each individual to determine what success looks like for them and what resources are needed to achieve it. The team collaborates closely with Native-serving organizations and other community partners to provide culturally specific support and improve engagement.

A central component of the program is the use of housing vouchers and culturally specific case management services. Carol shared that the Homeless Action Team has been operating for seven years and, during its first five years, helped connect more than 200 individuals to housing. She noted that when people struggled to maintain housing, the team remained engaged and continued working to identify solutions rather than viewing those situations as failures.

Through a story about an individual experiencing homelessness, substance use disorder, and a disability, Carol illustrated how personalized support, persistence, and strong community partnerships can help people achieve stability and avoid deeper justice-system involvement. She also highlighted the ongoing need for affordable housing and expanded housing opportunities for individuals with felony convictions or criminal records.

Metro Transit Police Department Breakout Room Themes

1. Individual Goals Should Drive Referrals and Support

Participants emphasized that effective referrals begin with understanding an individual's own goals, aspirations, and definition of success. Rather than steering people toward predetermined outcomes, participants discussed the importance of creating systems that listen to individuals and connect them with resources that align with their personal interests, strengths, and motivations. Several participants noted that long-term success is more likely when services are built around what matters to the individual rather than what a provider, agency, or system believes should happen.

Quotes from discussion:

"It's all these outside entities and organizations and people with acronyms behind their name... they're guessing what they think success would look like for that person instead of the individual themselves."

"Each individual person has their dreams, their goals, their aspirations. We don't get to pick that for them."

"If someone finds their purpose, they're good."

2. Lived Experience Helps Systems See Potential Rather Than Problems

Participants discussed the unique value that people with lived experience bring to corrections, treatment, and recovery systems. Individuals with lived experience often have a greater ability to build trust, recognize strengths, and identify opportunities that may not be obvious to others. The conversation highlighted how lived experience can help shift system responses away from focusing solely on an individual's mistakes and toward recognizing their potential, talents, and future possibilities. Participants also noted that lived experience creates credibility and rapport that can strengthen engagement and recovery outcomes.

Quotes from discussion:

"I always see the extra stuff, right? I'm able to see that because I came from that experience."

"I think having people lived experience in all entities of corrections is extremely important."

"I use my past as... my ammunition now to help other people. It's a way I can reach and build rapport with people that other providers can't."

3. Housing and Expungement Barriers Continue to Undermine Recovery

A significant portion of the discussion focused on the structural barriers that can make recovery difficult even after an individual has completed treatment or made substantial progress. Participants described how criminal records, challenges obtaining expungements, housing restrictions, benefit limitations, and voucher requirements can prevent people from securing stable housing and employment. These barriers were frequently described as factors that increase frustration, limit opportunities, and create additional risks for relapse. Participants stressed that sustainable recovery requires addressing these underlying barriers rather than expecting individuals to navigate them alone.

Quotes from discussion:

"Now you know can't get the housing, you know can't find employment, and so you know they did end up relapsing."

"If you have a record, you almost have to have like a law degree to advocate for yourself."

"There's still the barriers to the housing. There's a huge barrier to the housing."

"We're again setting people up for failure."

4. Recovery Is Disrupted When Systems Address Needs Separately

Participants raised concerns about the challenges individuals face when attempting to access treatment for co-occurring mental health and substance use conditions. The discussion highlighted ongoing disconnects between systems, particularly when individuals are required to seek treatment for mental health and substance use separately. Participants noted that many people seeking help experience both challenges at the same time and that fragmented approaches can delay care, increase frustration, and create additional barriers to recovery. The conversation reinforced the need for more coordinated and integrated approaches that reflect the realities of people's lived experiences.

Quotes from discussion:

"They will not do dual diagnosis anymore. They won't do mental health and SUDs at the same time. They have to be treated separately."

"How do you treat one and not the other?"

"Quit bringing your clients here. We're just gonna kick them out anyway."

5. Systems Change Requires Listening to and Learning From Lived Experience

Throughout the discussion, participants emphasized that people with lived experience possess valuable knowledge about where systems succeed and where they fall short. Participants described a desire to use their experiences to improve outcomes for others and stressed the importance of including lived experience voices in efforts to improve corrections, treatment, housing,

and recovery systems. The conversation reinforced the idea that meaningful system improvement requires not only listening to people with lived experience but also incorporating their perspectives into decision-making, program design, and service delivery.

Quotes from discussion:

"We need to fix these things to make things more successful for individuals to be successful."

"We do it because we know how beneficial it would have been if it was there for us at that time."

"There's more of us out there than you think."

Duluth Recovery Court: Recovery Court as an Alternative to Incarceration (Stephanie Morpew)

Stephanie Morpew, Lead Treatment Court Coordinator for Duluth Recovery Court, shared how Recovery Courts can serve as an alternative pathway to incarceration by combining accountability, treatment engagement and recovery-oriented supports. Her presentation focused on the role of restorative justice principles and community partnerships in improving outcomes for individuals with substance use disorders who are involved in the justice system.

Stephanie described Recovery Court as a collaborative model that brings together the court system, treatment providers, peer recovery supports, and community organizations to address the underlying factors contributing to justice involvement. Rather than focusing solely on punitive responses, the approach seeks to support long-term recovery and reduce future system involvement by connecting participants with treatment, recovery resources, and community support.

A central theme of Stephanie's presentation was the growing role of peer recovery support within the Recovery Court model. She described how peers can serve as trusted guides, helping participants navigate treatment, recovery, and court expectations while building relationships that encourage engagement and long-term success. The discussion highlighted how peer support creates opportunities for connection that may not be possible through formal systems alone.

Stephanie also discussed the importance of community partnerships in strengthening recovery outcomes. Through ongoing outreach and

relationship-building, Recovery Court staff connect with local organizations, recovery groups, and service providers to expand opportunities available to participants. These partnerships support recovery both within and beyond the court system by increasing access to sober activities, community events, and peer-based support networks.

Duluth Recovery Courts Breakout Room Discussion Themes

1. Peer Support Is Critical to Recovery Court Success

The strongest and most consistent theme centered on the value of peer recovery support. Participants described peers as uniquely positioned to engage individuals who may be hesitant to trust court systems or traditional providers. The lived experience of peers allows them to build authentic relationships and provide support in ways that complement formal court and treatment services. Participants shared examples of Recovery Court graduates who later became peer supports themselves, illustrating how lived experience can become a valuable asset for helping others navigate recovery and justice-system involvement.

Quotes from discussion:

"Peers make a world of difference."

"Our courts are actively seeking out peers."

2. Trust Building Takes Time but Produces Better Outcomes

Participants repeatedly identified trust as one of the largest barriers facing individuals entering Recovery Court. Many individuals have had negative experiences with systems and institutions, making relationship-building a critical component of successful engagement. Peer supports were viewed as particularly effective in helping bridge this gap and create connections between participants and the court system. The discussion suggested that sustained presence, consistency, and relationship-building are often just as important as formal interventions in supporting participant success.

Quotes from discussion:

"It can take a long time to build trust with the judge."

"We just kept showing up."

3. Community Partnerships Expand Recovery Opportunities

Participants emphasized that Recovery Courts are most effective when they are integrated into broader community networks. Building relationships with recovery organizations, treatment providers, peer programs, and community groups creates additional pathways for support and engagement beyond the courtroom. Stephanie described how partnerships can lead to increased access to peer supports, recovery resources, and sober community activities. Participants noted that recovery is strengthened when individuals are connected to community-based opportunities that reinforce positive relationships and healthy routines.

Quotes from discussion:

"Outreach goes both ways – we go to them and they come to us."

"I like this community [CoP] because it shows it takes everyone to connect and grow."

4. Restorative Justice Must Focus on Root Causes

Participants expressed support for restorative justice approaches that address the underlying causes of justice involvement rather than relying solely on punitive responses. Discussion highlighted both the promise of restorative practices and the differences participants observe across treatment court programs throughout the state. Several participants noted that restorative approaches can help create pathways to recovery by focusing on accountability, healing, and individualized support rather than judgment or punishment alone.

Quotes from GroupMap:

"Addresses root causes instead of symptoms."

"Duluth seems to be doing it right. In our area, it feels that we are still very punitive in the TC's and we are quick to judge the participant if they aren't doing what we think they should be doing."

Navigating Systems while Preserving Culture & Pursuing Recovery Breakout Room Themes

1. Cultural Connection Supports Healing and Long-Term Recovery

Participants emphasized that cultural identity, spirituality, and connection to community are not separate from recovery—they are often central to it. Discussion focused on the importance of helping individuals reconnect with

cultural traditions, practices, and community supports as part of the recovery process. Participants noted that recovery outcomes can be strengthened when services acknowledge and support cultural identity rather than treating it as an afterthought.

Quotes from GroupMap:

"Connection is the foundation of long term recovery."

"In my experience working with Native folks, when we can help reconnect them with their culture that helps with recovery."

"I work hard to walk with native clients to help them become reunited with their culture and their spirituality."

2. Systems Need Greater Cultural Responsiveness and Indigenous Representation

Participants discussed the need for systems to better understand and respond to the needs of Indigenous individuals and communities. Conversations highlighted the value of culturally specific assessments, programming, and leadership, as well as the importance of having Native voices represented within behavioral health and recovery systems. Participants noted that cultural responsiveness requires both formal training and meaningful community partnerships. [\[importance...s-groupmap | Excel\]](#)

Quotes from GroupMap:

"Always being able to offer culturally specific assessments."

"Culturally specific context is needed (Rule 25) has shown me to ask for native specific programs."

"We need people in our community in the SUD and mental health roles."

"Spiritual advisor or cultural leader in the community to come host a meeting in your facility."

3. Education and Access to Indigenous Resources Must Expand Beyond Tribal Communities

Participants identified opportunities to improve understanding of Indigenous history, culture, and systems among providers, educators, and community

organizations. The discussion highlighted the need for additional training, stronger awareness of resources, and expanded access to culturally specific supports, particularly in rural areas where Indigenous services and connections may be less visible. Participants emphasized that improving recovery outcomes requires both increasing access to resources and building greater cultural understanding across systems. [

Quotes from GroupMap:

"Need to branch out Native American resources into rural communities."

"In a rural area we often don't deal with anyone who is indigenous and one of the things I would like to see is social workers have a mandatory training on ICWA."

"Other culturally specific programs can try and expand basic knowledge of other cultures and know to connect with others in the community even if I am not an expert."

"ICWA -- training is really needed especially for juvenile funding because the short answer is 'no'."

What's Ahead

In Quarter 3, the Community of Practice will continue exploring the intersection of corrections and the substance use disorder (SUD) ecosystem. Upcoming sessions will examine how individuals experience reentry and recovery after incarceration, explore the distinct roles of county jails and the Minnesota Department of Corrections in supporting people with SUD, and identify policies, practices, and partnerships that help individuals remain connected to treatment, housing, peer supports, and other essential services as they transition back into their communities.

- Next meeting: Wednesday, August 19, 2026 (12:00–1:30 p.m., virtual).
- Links to RSVP, a brief meeting evaluation survey, and the lived/living experience stipend request form were shared in the chat.
- Post-meeting materials (slides and GroupMap synthesis) will be distributed by the facilitation team.
- For questions, contact: SUD.CoP@SDKStrategicservices.com