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CN Guidance Empowers Nearly 100 Long Islanders with Lived Experience to Help Others Recover

HICKSVILLE, NY – CN Guidance, in partnership with community organizations across Long Island, has successfully enrolled nearly 100 individuals with lived experience of mental health and/or substance use challenges to become Youth Peer Advocates and Family Peer Advocates, significantly expanding access to community-based behavioral health support.

Funded by the **New York State Office of Mental Health (OMH), the Youth and Family Peer Advocate Workforce Expansion Program** empowers individuals to transform their personal recovery experiences into meaningful careers helping others navigate mental health and substance use challenges. Participants receive training, credentialing assistance, financial stipends, and employment support to become certified Youth or Family Peer Advocates.

The initiative also promotes awareness of youth mental health needs and highlights the critical role peers play in fostering trust, engagement, and recovery among youth and families who may be reluctant to seek traditional services.

"Youth and Family Peer Advocates call on their own lived experience to help others through their behavioral health challenges and to work toward recovery," **OMH Commissioner Dr. Ann Sullivan said.** *"This valuable professional peer support workforce builds the critical bonds and supports with individuals and families that enable them to thrive in their communities. We congratulate CN Guidance and its local partners on reaching this milestone."*

For more than 15 years, CN Guidance has been a regional leader in integrating peer support specialists into behavioral health care. As part of an evidence-based approach, peer advocates work alongside clinical professionals to engage individuals facing mental health conditions, substance use disorders, homelessness, and other life challenges. Drawing from their own lived experiences, peers help bridge gaps in care, build trust, and connect individuals to services that improve outcomes.

CN Guidance delivers services throughout Nassau and Suffolk counties, including through specially equipped outreach vehicles such as its mobile RV and service truck. Outreach teams proactively engage adolescents and young adults in communities experiencing elevated rates of substance use, overdose risk, and unmet behavioral health needs.

Key partners in the initiative include the **Mental Health Association of Nassau County (MHANC) and Hands Across Long Island Inc. (HALI),** a peer-led organization. Together, the organizations

have enrolled nearly 100 individuals during the program's first year, helping to address the growing demand for trained peer advocates across Long Island.

"*We're grateful to CN Guidance and OMH for making this partnership possible. This project shows what organizations can accomplish when they work together and build on each other's strengths. HALI's grassroots ties helped us reach people who may not have seen peer support as a career path. Seeing so many participants trained, credentialed, and employed is something we can all be proud of,*" **said Melissa Wettengel, CEO, HALI.**

"The Family and Youth Peer Advocate Workforce Grant has demonstrated the power of lived experience to create meaningful change. Parents and young people have used their experiences and training to support others facing similar challenges, while discovering their own strengths and purpose. The most powerful transformation is seeing individuals realize they can make a difference in someone else's life," **said Jeffrey McQueen, Executive Director, MHANC.**

"Peer advocates bring something uniquely powerful to behavioral health care: lived experience," **said Christine Mann, Program Director at CN Guidance.** *"Whether they have personally faced mental health challenges or supported a loved one through recovery, they can connect with youth and families in ways that build trust, reduce stigma, and foster hope. Their experiences help others feel understood, supported, and empowered to seek help."*

Jeffrey Friedman, CEO of CN Guidance, said the program is creating new opportunities while strengthening the behavioral health workforce in underserved communities.

"We are grateful for New York State's investment in this important initiative," Friedman said. "By expanding the pipeline of trained and credentialed peer advocates, we are ensuring that individuals and families facing mental health and substance use challenges can connect with people who truly understand their experiences. This work is especially important in communities where barriers to care remain significant."

As demand for behavioral health services continues to grow, CN Guidance and its partners remain committed to expanding the peer workforce and improving access to recovery-oriented support throughout Long Island.

For more information about CN Guidance and its programs, visit **www.cnguidance.org** or call **516-822-6111.**

About CN Guidance and Counseling Services: *Serving children and adults with mental and emotional disorders since 1972, CN Guidance delivers NY-State licensed mental health and substance use treatment services to individuals and families, working in partnership with county government and other community services. With deep, localized knowledge of Nassau County and Suffolk County communities, a 24/7 crisis center, mobile fleet, telehealth capabilities, and a NY State Integrated Outpatient Services license, CN Guidance maintains an exemplary track record of delivering outreach and high-quality behavioral healthcare to more than 25,000 individuals per year. For more information, visit https://cnguidance.org/*