

## **Case Study: Collaborative Recovery Empowerment of the Southern Tier, Southern Tier 8**

In 2021, the Southern Tier East Regional Planning Development Board received a \$500,000 ARC grant to maintain employment and sustained recovery for those in the recovery workforce. The project, called “Collaborative Recovery Empowerment of the Southern Tier (CREST)” supports both sides of the labor market by helping workers find recovery-friendly workplaces, and helping workplaces hire and retain a talented workforce. This unique approach has established local workplaces as safe working spaces for people in recovery- helping both those who need employment and the businesses themselves.

### **Background – Region and Project**

The Southern Tier East Regional Planning Development Board (Southern Tier 8) is the northernmost LDD in the Appalachian region, serving 8 counties in New York State. The Southern Tier of New York state, like many regions in Appalachia, had been economically devastated by globalization and North American deindustrialization. Once a thriving manufacturing hub, the Southern Tier scored poorly on Gallup’s Wellness Index, suffered from high unemployment, and led the region in alcohol abuse. Further, ARC’s report on health disparities indicated the region was acutely afflicted by population wide health challenges and that opioid use was on the rise.

It was in this context that Southern Tier 8, under the leadership of executive director Jennifer Gregory, began to build their recovery-to-work ecosystem. The Board began by identifying partners and organizations in their region which were already engaged in the process of SUD recovery and workforce development. These organizations included local chambers of commerce, health and medical centers, workforce engagement groups, and housing support organizations. Altogether, the Board identified 70 organizations that could contribute in some way to an integrated recovery-to-work ecosystem. To bring these potential stakeholders to the table, Jennifer and the Board identified the leadership of each organization and the best practices underlying each one.

To effectively engage with other organizations, the Board had to develop several Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs). These MOUs contain a series of agreements or statements of mutual understanding between two organizations toward a common goal. In this case, the Board distributed MOUs detailing the project scope of work, roles and responsibilities of the Board and the target organization, and details on the proper use of funds (in the case of subrecipients). You can find an example of an MOU [here](#), on the ARC website. You can also [click here](#) to see the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA- a legally binding MOU, usually involving funding).

Once connections had been established, the Board worked with stakeholders to identify gaps, weaknesses, needs, and strengths of each organization. The Board established a set of standards to ensure that all organizations could accurately measure their performance. Subrecipients and partner organizations were asked to participate in regular team meetings and submit progress reports detailing their performance relative to the agreed-upon goals. By setting and abiding by shared standards, all organizations were able to share data on their progress and keep the Board abreast of developments across all eight regions.

From the preceding analysis, the ecosystem was able to form a network of mutual-support to meet individuals at any stage of the recovery process. The network’s formation process was facilitated by matching organizations in the region to the Recovery-to-Work Ecosystem diagram, created by ARC.



To offer the best service possible to individuals with SUD, the ecosystem needed funding. Thus, under the leadership of Southern Tier 8, the ecosystem created goals, strategies, organization roles, and a work plan to apply for funding from the ARC.

## **Results**

In 2021, the Southern Tier 8 was awarded a \$500,000 grant from ARC to systematically expand workforce assistance for those struggling with SUD. The new ecosystem set up regular check ins to share progress on project goals and to address challenges or changes in the scope of the project. The project is still operating in the Southern Tier region, bringing new individuals into the workforce, and promoting awareness of SUD among workplaces across the region. According to an ARC report: “CREST is expected to serve 25 businesses and 75 people in recovery and will create a new training program for peer support workers in the region. Partners include local chambers of commerce, workforce investment boards, community colleges, family and children’s counseling services, and a local alcohol and drug council. CREST will create new systems to allow workforce boards to engage substance abuse disorder treatment providers for wraparound services. Additional funding is being provided by the U.S. Economic Development Administration.”

## **Key Takeaways and Lessons Learned**

- Learning about the existing SUD support landscape is important to launching a recovery-to-work ecosystem
- MOUs and MOAs are one way region’s can expand and strengthen ecosystem partnerships
- Shared metrics for success help accurate partner assessments and keep ecosystem leaders up to date on project progress