



# Alchemy Project: Peer-Driven TAY Engagement and Case Management

## ABOUT ALCHEMY

VOICES' Alchemy Project is a partnership between VOICES Youth Centers and Sonoma County Behavioral Health Division aimed at increasing engagement levels of transition age youth within the mental health system. The Alchemy Project is a comprehensive support program for Sonoma County transition age youth experiencing severe mental health challenges that leverages VOICES' one-of-a-kind youth-engagement model to assist young adults in the cultivation of hope, safety, and stability—creating community while discovering their unique gifts, talents, and skills.

The Alchemy Project fully integrates youth engagement, youth leadership, coaching and mentorship, and training in independent living skills to support the recovery and resilience of youth ages 18 to 25 identified and referred by Sonoma County Behavioral Health's Transition Age Youth team. Alchemy youth experience a range of severe mental health challenges and barriers that interfere substantially with the primary activities of daily living and require ongoing access to supportive mental health treatment and community resources.

Diagnoses among Alchemy youth include schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other severely disabling mental disorders. Participation rates amongst transition age youth in treatment and recovery services have been low in years prior, so VOICES has been brought to the team in order to cultivate community connections and develop peer-led services wherein VOICES provides peer mentorship and advocacy delivered by young men and women who have direct experience with the mental health system.

In Sonoma County, VOICES has created a lively, welcoming Youth Center in Santa Rosa where youth engage in leadership opportunities and access a comprehensive service system that supports their education, employment, housing, and wellness needs. The Alchemy Project is located inside the Youth Center and is staffed by a team consisting of two experienced case managers and two peer mentors. The peer mentors have direct experience of the mental health system, play a vital role in connecting youth to services, and ensure the program provides a safe, comfortable, and accessible space for youth to access support. Staff function as a team to build rapport and meet individual needs of participants, allowing participants to have access to the entire VOICES staff and community as needed.

At the heart of all VOICES services, including the Alchemy Project, are **four core** goals:

1. Youths' needs are met by developmentally appropriate services
2. Youth feel capable, lovable, and worthy
3. Youth are valued and understood
4. Youth are prepared, connected, and contributing

All VOICES programs integrate **six key strategies** to advance these goals:

1. Youth leadership development
2. Community building
3. Intergenerational learning
4. Unique culture
5. Co-located staff
6. Systems change

The specific goals of the Alchemy Project include assisting youth in engaging and accessing appropriate mental health recovery programs and, as applicable, obtaining a high school diploma or GED, a source of income, a job and/or further education, stable housing, supportive permanent relationships, and a plan for utilizing community resources. The Alchemy team also seeks to develop pro-social support networks by integrating participants into the VOICES community.

Alchemy Project team members work in conjunction with the Sonoma County Behavioral Health interdisciplinary team, and depending on level of need and engagement with other community resources, program participants are provided with a range of case management supports. Alchemy program activities are varied and centered around appealing to the needs and interests of individual youth. Monthly events are hosted wherein an average of eight program participants attend community building events to encourage connection to peers and the outdoors. Previous outings have taken place at a range of Sonoma County Regional Parks, and included activities such as hiking, kayaking, volleyball, barbequing, and team-building activities. A weekly improvisation and drama-based group is held in which facilitators attempt to utilize distress tolerance, emotional regulation, and mindfulness skills in practical reenactments. Further, an Alchemy peer mentor facilitates a weekly recovery group for participants to find community with others recovering from substance use issues, mental health challenges, or any other barrier from which they are seeking recovery. Recently a leadership cohort for program participants was launched for those interested in developing leadership skills and taking ownership over planning ongoing events and outings.

## ALCHEMY RESULTS TO DATE

In its first two years (April 2017–June 2019), the Alchemy Project engaged a total of 52 youth referred by Sonoma County Behavioral Health—100% of the youth referred. By establishing trust and safety, Alchemy Case Managers and Peer Mentors have achieved an unprecedented level of engagement among the target population, drastically increasing points of service and contact with TAY participants.

- **52 youth** have been engaged through Case Management services, **42** of whom have received five or more points of service. In total, Alchemy youth have had **1,105 Case Management** contacts with program staff.
- **45 youth** have received at least one Peer Mentoring point of service, **32** of whom have received five or more points of service. In total, Alchemy youth have received **1,182 Peer Mentoring** points of service. Of these youth over half have begun to engage regularly with youth-led programming at VOICES Youth Center, providing opportunities to develop pro-social peer networks and mentoring relationships, and access the comprehensive array of services described above.

## THE VOICES OF ALCHEMY YOUTH

On November 1, 2018, VOICES staff surveyed 12 Alchemy youth to get their perspectives on the program and its impacts. Eleven of the 12 Alchemy Youth reported increased support from both staff and peers since connecting with the Alchemy Project. Alchemy Youth also reported having positive support networks and a willingness to access their support networks as needed.

Alchemy Youth felt strongly that participating in the program had helped them improve their functioning across life domains and their supportive relationships:

| <b>Participating in VOICES &amp; the Alchemy Project has helped me improve:</b> | <b>NOT TRUE</b> | <b>TRUE</b> | <b>N/A</b> |
|---|-----------------|-------------|------------|
| My current housing situation  | 1               | 9           | 2          |
| My school participation/education   | 0               | 9           | 3          |
| My job  | 2               | 6           | 4          |
| My physical health  | 1               | 9           | 3          |
| My relationship with healthcare providers                                       | 0               | 8           | 5          |
| My emotional health   | 0               | 11          | 1          |
| My relationship with my counselor/therapist                                     | 0               | 7           | 5          |
| My relationship with my social worker   | 0               | 9           | 3          |
| My relationships  | 2               | 8           | 2          |

| <b>Have the following improved since you began participating in Alchemy?</b> | <b>HAS NOT IMPROVED</b> | <b>IMPROVED</b> | <b>N/A / DECLINE</b> |
|--|-------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| My physical health   | 2                       | 9               | 1                    |
| My emotional/mental health   | 1                       | 9               | 2                    |
| My diet  | 1                       | 7               | 4                    |
| My tobacco use   | 2                       | 3               | 6                    |
| My alcohol use   | 1                       | 2               | 9                    |
| My drug use  | 1                       | 1               | 10                   |
| Getting enough exercise  | 1                       | 8               | 3                    |
| Getting enough sleep   | 4                       | 6               | 2                    |
| My relationship with my family   | 3                       | 6               | 3                    |
| My romantic relationships  | 2                       | 4               | 6                    |
| My relationships with friends  | 1                       | 6               | 5                    |
| Hobbies or recreational activities   | 2                       | 9               | 1                    |
| Other healthy behavior(s):   | 1                       | 2               | 4                    |

To gain additional perspective on youths' experiences, needs, and recommendations, Alchemy staff conducted a follow-up listening session with seven Alchemy participants in attendance.

**All of the youth were enthusiastic about Alchemy outings and VOICES community activities, stating:**

“The outings are a source of community and comfort.”

“VOICES interrupts my anxiety around the mental health system by being a safe and calming place of support without pressure to do things. I can be myself.”

“The outings are really cool because we get to meet our peers and it’s a safe place to learn to become more sociable.”

- “Alchemy staff do everything they can to help and you can tell that they really care about the youth.”

“I feel like I gained the trust of VOICES staff by being asked to help with tasks around the center.”

**Several youth noted the support of Alchemy Staff with specific independent living needs:**

“They are good at helping me come up with goals/plans to achieve.”

“They helped me with my applications for housing and SSI.”

“They helped me get into a shelter.”

“They visited me in jail, and sent books to me in jail.”

“They help me with transportation.”

Participating youth also had suggestions for how the program could be improved:

- Several participants expressed strong opinions about the mental health treatment they were receiving, including that they would prefer to meet with their psychiatrist face-to-face and that they are personally affected by staff turnover. Three youth offered strong opinions about the use of medication: One said that they felt that medication was forced on them, while another expressed the opinion that medication is “posed as their primary means of support without much information about it, the reasons for it, the side-effects, etc.” Another youth participant expressed the opinion that “once someone has been hospitalized it becomes the go-to thing even if the youth has expressed that they are not going to do anything and have a safety plan.”
- Many youth expressed needing additional support in securing stable employment, help with substance use issues, and gaining access to additional financial supports to stabilize housing.

Having reviewed the survey and data from the listening session, Alchemy staff are working to integrate youth feedback into program planning. Through the implementation of a weekly leadership cohort, participants have been able to provide more input into the way the Alchemy Project operates. Trainings have been scheduled and staff are actively researching ways to better support youth with making more informed choices around medication use. A weekly peer-led recovery group seeks to support youth with substance issues, and more intentional focus has been given to employment support and partnering with community agencies for more effective access to financial supports.

## ALCHEMY ANECDOTES

The stories of two recent clients provide further illustration of both the challenges faced by participating young people and the success of the Alchemy model:

J. had been homeless on the streets of Santa Rosa for an entire year, and had been in and out of the hospital in the months prior to being referred to the Alchemy Project. Since being a part of the program, he hasn't been hospitalized once. He meets weekly with both a Peer Mentor and an adult VOICES staff, and has joined almost all of the VOICES community activities and outings. After bonding with VOICES staff, he accepted help in accessing a shelter in Petaluma, and within months moved into permanent supportive housing, where he still resides. J. recognizes that the past year represents more stability than he's experienced at any point in his adolescence. He has been working part-time for the past few months and also regularly volunteers at VOICES.

M. grew up in foster care in Sonoma County and throughout her adolescence had a long history of self-harm and suicidality. For several years before being referred to Alchemy the interaction of her mental health needs and substance abuse had completely destabilized her interpersonal relationships and housing situation. During a tumultuous stay in a residential substance abuse program, she was connected with Alchemy and began meeting with Peer Mentors and VOICES staff on a weekly basis. The relationships had a stabilizing effect and supported her in completing the program, after which she was able to transition to less restrictive, independent living-focused housing, and will soon move into her own apartment.

## CONCLUSION

Given the Alchemy Project's success to date, VOICES is eager to continue supporting Sonoma County young adults experiencing severe mental health challenges. VOICES is also interested in continuing to develop innovative, complementary approaches that provide proactive supports to youth in the hopes of preventing the kinds of psychiatric crises many Alchemy youth have experienced. In the coming year the Alchemy Project will be exploring evidence-based models and approaches to best support youth and their families during and after psychiatric crises with the hope of more effectively cultivating stability, safety and long-term recovery.