

Supporting Whole Health

“Rarely do we have anyone not take advantage of the opportunity to learn their HIV status and over the years, we have helped several HIV+ clients return to medical care.”



Brandi Leichmann and Narsheba Aasir, MARR in metro Atlanta

“After Narsheba Aasir and Brandi Leichmann attended INSTI training in January, HIV testing at MARR in metro Atlanta more than doubled. MARR offers HIV testing to individuals with a substance use disorder in two facilities: a men’s recovery center and Right Side Up, a residential recovery center for women.

Director Marcia Smith describes Right Side Up as “a six month residential program serving 57 women. Each resident is permitted to bring up to two children under 13 with them and we offer therapeutic childcare which helps lift some of the stress that women, in particular, feel coming into treatment.” Clients are referred by the Department of Family and Children Services, the State Board of Pardons and Paroles, various drug courts, and alumni.

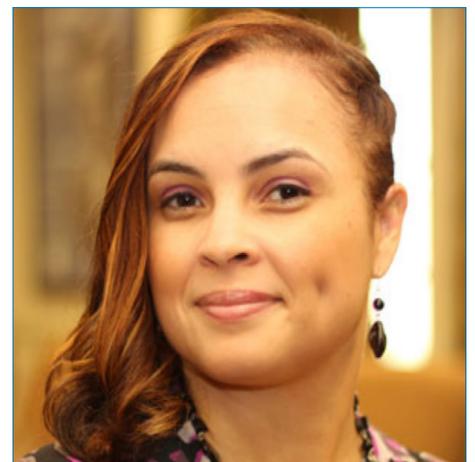
HIV testing is a routine part of the admission process at both facilities - a component of MARR’s holistic approach to recovery. “When I sit down with clients,” says Narsheba, “we talk about a lot of things, including HIV. It’s a normal part of the conversation. I open the topic by asking what they know about HIV. That clarifies how much education they may need to understand the value of taking the test: it’s free, it’s fast, it’s confidential – and it has the potential to save lives.”

The rationale behind a whole health program, says Marcia, is that substance use “impacts every part of a client’s life; it affects them mentally, physically, and spiritually. You can’t address just one part; they all intertwine.” When clients enter treatment, most have been neglecting themselves. Many have not addressed basic medical needs. “A client may be HIV positive and off their medication. Returning to medical treatment or - for those who haven’t been tested - learning their status, is an important step toward reclaiming a healthier life.”

As their health improves, clients grow more confident, more likely to speak up for themselves. Brandi says, “When they enter care, a lot of clients are broken. Very rarely does someone come in without a history of trauma – and for most, the trauma is compounded by shame about choices they’ve made in the past.”

Marcia adds, “We have a relationship group and a domestic violence group. You can see someone having that ‘aha moment’ when they realize, ‘Okay, that’s what I went through.’ They get to share those experiences and then explore what a healthy relationship might look like.”

“It’s amazing to see the difference after 6 months,” says Brandi. “They hold their head higher. They haven’t worked in years and now they have a job. They’re knowledgeable about HIV and their own health needs and they have coping skills.”



Marcia Smith, Right Side Up Director

“Initially, some clients are very uncomfortable with any kind of positive feedback,” says Marcia. “So for me, to witness someone who is now able hear that they have inspired others – and to see that grin on their face – is a beautiful thing.” ■