

## **Employer Case Study**

# Preventing and Addressing Substance Use Disorder (SUD) in the Workforce: *The Power of Community*

## **A conversation with J. J. Bartlett, President, Fishing Partnership Support Services**

### **Background**

**Fishing Partnership Support Services (FPSS)** is a non-profit organization started in 1997 that improves the health, safety and economic security of New England commercial fishing families. Their broad range of activities includes direct health services and education, professional counseling, health insurance applications assistance, safety and survival training, financial planning and more. Fishermen and their family members drive the organization's work in the fishing community.

**J.J. Bartlett** is the founder and President of FPSS and has over 25 years of healthcare industry experience. He received a BA from Harvard University and an MBA with a concentration in healthcare management from Boston University.

### **Discussion**

**Grayken Center:** Tell us about the focus of your organization, commercial fishermen.

**J.J. Bartlett:** There are over 7,000 fishermen in Massachusetts - both male and female fishermen - and 20,000 fishermen in New England. This includes all fishermen, from those who work in small skiffs along the shoreline, to the dayboat lobstermen, to the trip fishermen who spend weeks at sea. It is an ethnically diverse and vibrant community. Fishermen are independent workers, often self-employed, who depend on their strength and endurance to make a living in an incredibly dangerous environment.

**Grayken Center:** Why does your organization focus on fishermen?

**J.J. Bartlett:** First, fishermen deserve our services. They risk their lives to feed us. And fishermen form the critical foundation of the Massachusetts seafood industry, which supports over 90,000 jobs. Second, fishermen need our services. As independent workers, they don't have corporate departments providing the services that workers in a typical company might have available to them, such as health care, paid sick leave, occupational safety training, professional development training, financial planning services, grief counselling, and SUD treatment. Combine that with the dangers of working on the ocean and the economic uncertainty from a variable, highly-regulated harvest, and it's no surprise that fishermen are at risk. Of particular relevance to the Grayken Center, fishermen are five times more likely to die of an opioid overdose than the average Massachusetts worker.

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That’s according to a study released last year by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, which found that the workers who were most likely to die of an opioid overdose often shared the following three job characteristics: they were likely to experience pain and injuries on a job, they had little or no access to paid sick leave, and they had low job security. If fishermen don’t work through discomfort or even extreme pain, they don’t get paid and will probably lose their jobs. So they are often prescribed pain medications.

**Grayken Center:** How does “community” play a role in the FPSS programs?

**J.J. Bartlett:** The things that make fishing unique, the time away from family, the variable income, the independence, these are the shared experiences that tie fishermen and their families together as a tight-knit community. There are local community networks in each port town and larger networks along the coast. For outsiders, fishing families can be hard to reach. FPSS recognized that we had to be part of this community to succeed in our work. To overcome this outreach challenge, we hire employees who are from fishing families or fishermen themselves. We call them “Navigators.” The Navigator epitomizes our service model. They understand the independent fishermen and their families. They have immediate credibility. They are highly trained as community health workers, so they can provide a host of services. We have offices in port towns and our Navigators deliver their services and outreach where fishermen live and work: on the docks, at trade shows, at industry meetings, and at other fishing events.

**Grayken Center:** What is the role of an FPSS Navigator as it relates to Substance Use Disorder?

**J.J. Bartlett:** The Navigators recognize when there are unmet needs in their community. They were already signing fishermen up for health care so that they could access SUD treatment, but that’s only part of the battle. So, we trained Navigators as recovery coaches. In New Bedford, Navigators do ride-alongs with the police so that we can bring our services to the community. They walk the docks and the fish plants and talk to fishermen and vessel owners about Narcan and SUD treatment. They host a weekly peer-to-peer meeting where fishermen talk with other fishermen about their recovery. They even led us to teach ergonomics to lower the risk of a muscular-skeletal injury and the resulting pain.

**Grayken Center:** Say more about the role of pain in the lives of fishermen.

**J.J. Bartlett:** I believe that at the core of Substance Use Disorder is pain; pain of all types. For the independent fishermen and other independent workers in construction, farming, etc., pain is a part of the job. As I mentioned, fishermen do not get paid days off. They must show up on days when others would stay home to recover from an injury. Independent workers experience the anxiety of low job security. If they don’t come to work, they lose income and then perhaps their jobs. Anyone who succumbs to ailments or injuries, however serious, risks getting a bad reputation and then they will not be hired for any crew.

**Grayken Center:** As you know, overcoming stigma is essential when tackling Substance Use Disorder. How did FPSS assist the community in this critical step?

**J.J. Bartlett:** Overcoming stigma is an immense challenge. To better understand this hurdle, we did a study with UMass Lowell on perceptions of Substance Use Disorder in New Bedford, the largest fishing port in the country. It was clear that the fishing community felt isolated and misunderstood by the general public and tagged with stereotypes regarding SUD. So FPSS began a campaign of “myth busting.” We established a team of recovery coaches; 2 fishermen and 2 of our Navigators. They actively engaged the fishing community and the industry to reduce the fishermen’s view that they were isolated in the struggle against SUD. Our team promoted FPSS services to fishermen and the community. We expanded the circle. We ran a promotional campaign with this tagline: *We help fishermen survive storms. We help anyone survive addiction.* We focused on the science and the symptoms. We explained the role of pain in the use of opioids. We showed that SUD was a national issue not just a fishing consideration. This broad engagement with fishermen, the community and the industry began to lessen stigma.

**Grayken Center:** In what ways did you use the Grayken Center resources? Which were most useful?

**J.J. Bartlett:** The Grayken Center resources got us started and kept the momentum going. We relied on the solid, current data provided by the Center. These data supported our assertion to the fishing community that many people in other walks of life were dealing with Substance Use Disorder, too. In addition, the Grayken Center materials on reducing stigma are excellent. We all know that “words matter.” The Grayken Center advances the use of terminology that clearly describes the topic without the negative, stigmatizing traditional language. This helped us speak to fishermen about the challenges of Substance Use Disorder. The parent-oriented resources supported our efforts to show the independent fishermen that non-fishing parents faced similar circumstances. We also took the productivity data from Grayken. We educated the fishing community on the loss of productivity that comes with parents dealing with children affected by SUD.

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**Grayken Center:** Tell us a bit more about the FPSS “Advisory Team.”

**J.J. Bartlett:** As suggested on the Grayken Center website, an essential first step an organization must take is to bring together a team from all levels of the organization to lead the effort to address Substance Use Disorder. Our cross-functional Advisory Team provided the perspective of *their* fishing community. The team’s makeup meant that we were tackling the problem with the people who knew what was going on. This gave us legitimacy from the beginning and ensured that the moves we made had relevance to the people we serve. You cannot address Substance Use Disorder without this team.

**Grayken Center:** Access to Narcan (naloxone) has proven to be important for the fishing community. Describe some of the difficulties associated with making Narcan (naloxone) available to fishermen.

**J.J. Bartlett:** It is tough to reach the fishermen and vessel owners. You can't predict when they will be in port or how long they will stay. When they are at the dock, they are not getting paid. So, you're taking time out of their unpaid work day to convince them that they should carry Narcan. In addition, there are reasons they initially don't want to carry Narcan. Some don't believe it's a problem on their vessel. Others think they will be viewed as "opioid friendly" and will attract fishermen with substance use problems or perhaps an investigation by law enforcement. And there's the cost. Narcan is critical, but it is also expensive for a fisherman who makes, on average, \$28,000 a year.

**Grayken Center:** What have you and the fishing community done to overcome the obstacles to Narcan (naloxone) access?

**J.J. Bartlett:** Our Navigators are essential. They work with each other and community partners to develop a list of best practices and convincing arguments. For instance, one captain was adamant that he did not want to carry Narcan because he believed that drug use was not a problem on his boat. But, he trusted our Navigator who convinced him to provide the training. Some weeks later, he informed our Navigator that he used Narcan to save his crewman's life. Fishermen like this captain become advocates for our program around the docks. We also reduce the financial and logistics burdens on fishermen by bringing the Narcan to them at the docks and including Narcan training as part of every CPR/First Aid course we offer. To address the concern that law enforcement might take an interest in a vessel carrying Narcan, we've joined the New Bedford Police Department's Waterfront Task Force, where we have productive discussions with the police, the Coast Guard, and the Massachusetts Environmental Police (MEP). In fact, the Coast Guard and MEP are now carrying Narcan on their vessels because of the conversations that we and our partners had with them.

**Grayken Center:** How do you assess the value – tangible and intangible – of the Substance Use Disorder efforts you have made?

**J.J. Bartlett:** #1) Training on Substance Use Disorder and Narcan access *has saved lives*. That's absolutely tangible. #2) Taking on stigma *head-on* has opened lines of communications. We now have fishermen talking to fishermen about physical and emotional pain, reducing workplace dangers and a host of other topics that can improve their lives. #3) The social isolation has diminished. Individual fishermen are now helping the shoreline communities in which they work/reside. Not feeling alone has great value.

**Grayken Center:** What one recommendation would you make to a person starting a Substance Use Disorder program and what one major misstep would you hope they'd avoid?

**J.J. Bartlett:** The recommendation: Involve employees *at all levels* of the organization and pay special attention to those employees doing activities that could result in pain and injury. The misstep to avoid: *Never* institute a program of this type from the top down.

#### **For More Information**

To contact J.J. Bartlett about the material discussed in this case study, you can email him at [jbartlett@fishingpartnership.org](mailto:jbartlett@fishingpartnership.org) or call him at 617-928-3443.