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FEATURED

## OnTrack celebrates first class of state-certified drug and alcohol counselors

By ERICK BENGEL Rogue Valley Times  
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Jennifer Beaver-France, of Medford, right, embraces Katrin Yount, the quality and compliance director at OnTrack Rogue Valley, at the OnTrack's first On-PACE graduation ceremony.

Erick Bengel / Rogue Valley Times

In 2016, Jennifer Beaver-France had a 31-year addiction to alcohol and drugs such as methamphetamine and oxycodone, and four prison terms spanning two states.

Chat

“I was a garbage-can junkie,” she said.

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The Medford resident recently became a state-certified alcohol and drug counselor at OnTrack Rogue Valley, an addiction treatment provider. And on Friday, at the nonprofit’s outpatient center on West Main Street, Beaver-France celebrated her completion of the 18-month program that made her new role possible.

She and six others — many, like Beaver-France, who have struggled with addiction and homelessness themselves — make up the very first cohort of OnTrack's On-PACE (Peer and Counselor Education) Program.



Anthony Balentine, of Medford, graduates from the On-PACE program, accepting his plaque and rose from Brittney Wikoff, the agency's training coordinator.

Erick Bengel / Rogue Valley Times

A former OnTrack client, Beaver-France is now counseling people as she was counseled, working alongside the very people who helped save her, she said. She is now the women’s coordinator there, and the liaison among the agency, Portland State University and the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services.

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Antina Antilia, of Medford, right, graduates from the On-PACE, as Brittney Wikoff, OnTrack's training coordinator, hands her a rose and a plaque.

Erick Bengel / Rogue Valley Times

“I knew that I wanted to help addicts,” she told her fellow graduates, their loved ones and supporters in the Crescent Room. “I knew that my place in this world was to help the addict ... that still suffers.”

Before white, winking string lights and a wall of balloons — some spelling “congrats” in gold — the graduates, one by one, came to the front amid rapturous applause. They returned to their seats with a rose, a certificate of recognition on a plaque and a medallion emblazoned with a guinea pig that memorializes their status as “test subjects” and co-creators of the new program.

Developed with a \$2.2 million grant through the federal Health Resources and Services Administration, On-PACE gives participants field experience in treatment settings under clinical supervision.

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Carlos Corona, of Central Point, right, is all smiles at On-PACE graduation day. From left: Brittney Wikoff, OnTrack training coordinator; Sommer Wolcott, the agency's executive director; Regina Mannino, training and analytics manager; and Eddie Wallace, communications director.

Erick Bengel / Rogue Valley Times

“Oregon ranks among the highest in the country for drug and alcohol addiction and disorders,” said Katrin Yount, OnTrack’s quality and compliance director, at the ceremony. “And unfortunately, it ranks among the lowest in treatment accessibility.”

Antina Antilia of Medford; Anthony Balentine of Medford; Carlos Corona of Central Point; Nichole Fox of Medford; Jennifer Rodgers of Grants Pass; and William Schacher of Hugo also graduated that evening.

Each received about 170 hours of classroom training with more than a dozen experts in the Southern Oregon mental and behavioral health care fields.

They apprenticed at OnTrack’s outpatient and residential treatment programs, as well as at La Clinica’s Birch Grove Health Center, Oasis Center of the Rogue Valley and the Jackson County Community Justice Transition Center.

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Jennifer Rodgers, of Grants Pass, right, hugs Katrin Yount, of OnTrack Rogue Valley, at OnTrack's first On-PACE graduation.

Erick Bengel / Rogue Valley Times

They worked as clinicians — as professionals in the field, Yount said — providing outreach services to community members, facilitating groups, taking on client caseloads.

“I got to watch you as individuals develop from — sometimes admittedly — timid new counselors to come into your own and really develop and discover your own unique set of strengths,” Yount told them.

Most graduates had already become certified; the rest would soon. OnTrack has enough open positions for counselors that all seven applied for positions there.



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Nichole Fox, of Medford, right, embraces Katrin Yount at the first On-PACE graduation ceremony.

Erick Bengel / Rogue Valley Times

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“There’s such a shortage of certified alcohol and drug counselors,” said Sommer Wolcott, OnTrack’s executive director.

Some graduates are working in the outpatient center, others in the residential centers, which have more than 150 people on the wait list, Eddie Wallace, OnTrack’s communications director, estimated.

With the federal grant, which lasts four years, OnTrack expects to graduate eight classes, each beginning every six months. Although the agency’s original plan was to graduate 30 people per year, the “sweet spot,” Wolcott said, will be about 18.



William Schacher, right, of Hugo, accepts a plaque, medallion and rose at the On-PACE graduation.

Erick Bengel / Rogue Valley Times

On-PACE is also supported by Measure 110 funding and other state money. “And if we don’t get another grant, we’ll find a way to keep it going,” Wolcott said.

OnTrack hopes to train enough people that they can go to work at other agencies in the region.

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The agency knew that On-PACE — like OnTrack itself and behavioral health care in general — would attract people seeking a second chance, people who society may have once written off.



Jennifer Beaver-France, of Medford, addresses her cohort, their loved ones and supporters at the inaugural graduation of On-PACE.

Erick Bengel / Rogue Valley Times

Balentine said in an interview: “I’d had a slew of people in control of my life for so long that told me that I was a piece of sh--, that I was the degradation of society, that I was nothing but a dope fiend and a drug dealer, and I could never change, and I didn’t deserve to have anything better, that (it) was probably best for me to be in a penitentiary, away from mainstream society, because I, well, I was dangerous to them.”

More than once, convinced he would never finish a court-ordered drug-treatment program at OnTrack and unwilling to return to jail, Balentine considered suicide before someone stepped in, he said.

He got his state license in alcohol and drug counseling the day after Beaver-France got hers.

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Anthony Balentine, of Medford, foreground right, talks with his mother, Margie Bridges, during the ceremony.

Erick Bengel / Rogue Valley Times

“I have a purpose,” he said. “Which means a lot to me. I didn’t have a lot of that when I was growing up.”

At Friday’s ceremony, Balentine’s mother, Margie Bridges, was there to see him graduate, along with his wife and grandchild.

“He’s my son,” Bridges said, looking at Balentine in his square, sky-blue cap. “He’s my counselor son.”

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