

# Voices of FACT:

## How Forensic Assertive Community Treatment Changes Lives

Consider this quote from a person with bipolar disorder who lives in the Cincinnati, Ohio, area:

*“I had total chaos in my life...I was moving from person’s house to person’s house and never had anything really to look forward to or call my own. I was fussing and fighting and arguing and going to jail constantly for...domestic battery and stuff like that. And I was having major outbursts for no reason and never had a way to understand it, basically.*”

Mental health systems, criminal justice systems, and communities across the country deal with people like this every day. For many people with severe mental illnesses, traditional treatment models—such as counseling, psychotherapy, outpatient treatment, and medication—manage their symptoms and allow them to live in the community and reach their potential. Others, however, need more support and intensive services. Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) is one model of providing this support. In ACT, a multidisciplinary team of professionals provide treatment and supportive services to a small group of consumers on a 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week basis and wherever the consumer is: at home, at the store, at work or a volunteer opportunity, or elsewhere in the community.

Forensic ACT (FACT) is ACT that focuses specifically on people with mental illnesses who are involved in the criminal justice system. The FACT team staff have experience, skills, and knowledge in the mental health and criminal justice systems. The resources, services, and goals of the FACT team are tailored to the needs of people involved in the criminal justice system. The

Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati has funded 10 ACT teams in our region, 4 of which are FACT teams. During a study of the results of these 10 ACT teams, the Health Foundation heard from consumers, staff, and community stakeholders that FACT has changed their lives and their communities. For more information about the full study, please visit our web site at [www.healthfoundation.org](http://www.healthfoundation.org).

## Voices of Consumers

The interviews clearly illustrated the profound impact of FACT on the lives of the consumers who participated in this study. Consider, for example, what the same person quoted at the beginning of this brief had to say about involvement with a FACT team:

*“I’ve actually gotten back on medication. I’ve been able to see the doctor and get that part straightened out...[When] I started the program, I started getting the counseling and I started being able to talk about my problems and started to understand where my outbursts were coming from. And it helped me in that aspect. And they also helped me teach myself how to be motivated enough to get a job and keep a job long enough to actually say that I had a job.*”

Other interviews with the consumers on FACT teams brought forth similar positive results and experiences. Major themes included improvements in relationships with others, quality of life, and mental and physical health as well as reductions in involvement with the criminal justice system.

## Overall Feeling about FACT

Almost all consumers expressed something positive about their FACT teams and it is clear that a number of consumers felt that FACT rescued them from life threatening situations. For example, one consumer said:

*“I’ve enjoyed being with the program. Basically, it was a life changing thing. And there was actually a time when I could have died if I stayed in the situation that I was in. And one of the counselors had been firm with me and told me exactly what was going on in that situation and that if I didn’t see that, I was gonna end up dead. That right there made me leave that situation. I was scared to [leave, but] she put it into perspective. And I’m out of that situation now, so it saved my life.*”

Consumers clearly also appreciated that the FACT team members were available to listen to and help them. One consumer shared:

*“I love them. The team is warm and welcoming and just being there. They’ve been there for me. I mean this whole four months has been a blessing ‘cause I’ve been going through some tragedies. And they’re just there to listen and to help me throughout. And that’s something that I always wanted, somebody to be there helping. Whew. And they’re here for that, and it’s great.*”

Another consumer summed up FACT this way:

*“I just think it’s a great program. And when they came to me in jail, I wasn’t receptive [sic] of, you know, jail. When they said they were going to get me out of jail, I was like “okay, fine.” So, I was okay with that. But it was—after I got out of jail and stuff, it was kind of hard because I had drew up in myself and everything. And it was kind of hard and they stuck in there with me, you know. They didn’t turn their backs and stuff on me.*”

## Experiences Before and After FACT

Most consumers reported stark contrasts with regard to how things were going for them prior to receiving FACT and after receiving FACT. One consumer reported that before FACT:

*“Well, I was really in bad shape. I didn’t know how to go about getting help. The only thing that I really knew that I had to do was try to care for myself and my habit. And that’s what leads to criminal behavior, which limited me on jobs. I felt like I couldn’t work because of my record. So, I had to keep being a criminal to support myself and my habit. I didn’t know where to go for help. I didn’t know who to talk to. I was suicidal all the time. And I really hated myself for all the feelings and things that I was doing. I had an apartment but I was evicted because I couldn’t pay the rent. And then, I was just, like, going from place to place and sometimes in homeless shelters and sometimes with friends or just wherever. I was in jail all the time. I just spent two years in the penitentiary. I’ve been in the penitentiary 3 times and I’ve been in jail probably 30 to 40 times.*”

The same consumer, when asked about life after receiving FACT services, reported:

*“Yeah, I haven’t had any problems. I work at McDonalds’ full-time.*”

## How FACT Helped with Mental Health

The majority of consumers reported that their FACT teams helped them with a range of issues, including mental health and medication needs. For example, one consumer said:

*“I get my medication now and they have a program upstairs where they provide psychological help for me. And that’s once a month. And I just got housing. I’ll be moving into my apartment this week. They showed me that they cared and they stuck in there with me and, you know, kept getting me to the point where [I could talk.] I wasn’t able to talk at all. I could talk but I...wouldn’t open up to nobody. And that was a hard thing for me to do. And the only way I would know to relieve myself was try to commit suicide, all the times I [tried to commit] suicide. But now, since I’ve been with the program, when I feel myself getting that way, I mainly go to the hospital. And that’s a big step for me because I was actually doing things, like taking pills and cutting myself. And by the time they got to me, I was either out of it because*”

*I had overdosed the medication or something like that. And now, when I feel myself getting that way, I mainly go to the doctor. I call [the FACT team] and then they come over and they...take me to the doctor to get me help.*

A number of consumers commented on how the teams helped them get stable on their medications. For example, one consumer shared:

*“I’m looking for a job. I’m stable on my medication. I see the doctor regularly. I’ve got a case manager that helps me out with everything. Whenever I need help, all I’ve got to do is call and ask for help and they help immediately. I go to day report and I have a probation officer. They help with everything.”*

### **How FACT Helped with Life Skills and Basic Needs**

Most of the consumers commented on how FACT helped them find a job, find stable housing, or become involved in their communities in a more meaningful way. Their stories speak to the profound needs of the consumers and illustrate the need for a comprehensive set of services that go beyond mental health treatment and extend into life skills and basic needs.

For example, one consumer shared:

*“Well, when I first joined [the FACT team] in May, I was homeless and I had to live in a drop-in center, a shelter. And I stayed there two months. And then I went to an all women’s facility housing, I got a one-room with a bed and a dresser and a table. And I stayed there for about six months. They helped me get back on my SSI disability, you know, because I wasn’t receiving it—well, I was. My mother was my aide but I wasn’t getting none. They helped me get a different payee and they helped me be financially able to pay my bills. So, a protective payee. Yeah, since February this year. So, they helped me get...a two bedroom apartment. I’m living, staying clean. I do Narcotics Anonymous...I go to meetings every day. And also, through the process, I have received custody back of one of my children.”*

Housing was a common theme, as illustrated by this consumer’s story:

*“My housing is a lot better. My social security just got approved today, so I started receiving that again. They cut it off while I was in prison. I did 18 months in prison. I got [social security] back with the help of [the FACT team]. And they’ve been helping me with my housing. And that’s a lot better ‘cause now I can get adjusted to a certain environment. And I don’t have to worry about where I’m going to live, one week to the next for whatever reason.”*

Repeatedly, consumers talked about how the FACT team helped them address issues that were big deals to the consumers but that many people take for granted, like transportation, insurance, and health care services. One consumer shared:

*“They’re really good about transportation. So, that’s not a problem with me. And it just really helped me out a lot. I mean, they helped me get my teeth fixed, which was a big issue for me. And they’re trying to help me get insurance and they’re just really great trying to really help me get to where I don’t have all these problems and things I need to worry about.”*

#### **Want to learn more about FACT?**

For more information regarding the FACT model, implementation, or the Ohio Coordinating Center for ACT’s data on FACT teams, please contact:

Jon Ramos  
Ohio Coordinating Center for ACT  
513-458-6684  
jramos@ohioactcenter.org  
www.ohioactcenter.org

## How FACT Helped with Criminal Justice System Involvement

Approximately one third of the consumers reported having help with their legal problems and staying out of jail or prison as a result of their involvement with FACT. For example, one consumer stated:

*“I think this is really what I needed. I don’t think if they hadn’t been here for me that I would have made it off parole. I would probably be back to prison.”*

Further, a number of consumers described how their FACT teams worked with their probation or parole officers, including one consumer who shared:

*“They came down there and got me out of jail. I was in jail for domestic violence. Well, I had a restraining order against my husband and I violated it by us staying together. So, they put both of us in jail. And I had to do 17 days. And the day before I went to court...they came down there and did an assessment on me. And they came to court with me and got me out of jail. They went before the judge with me and stuff. Yeah, they go with me to my probation officer.”*

## Voices of Staff

We also talked to FACT staff members about their experiences with FACT teams and the changes they saw in consumers, themselves, and the community.

### Changes in Consumers

All staff commented on the remarkable changes that they saw in the consumers they served. For example, one staff member shared:

*“A lot of the clients we serve now are ones that, as they always say, kind of fall through the cracks. [They] didn’t have ways [to get treatment] until we actually made a point to go out there and make sure they were getting the services that they needed. So, I think that’s the main difference, that these people are actually engaged.”*

All staff also had remarkable consumer success stories. For example, one staff member told this story:

*“When he came to us a year ago, he was extremely dependent upon us for everything. Now, over that year, this person has actually grown now...he [was] a functional illiterate...over this past year he has worked and he has demonstrated the ability [to read]. He can tell you small words and even his vocabulary has improved...And he continues to work on learning to spell as well as read. His substance abuse had got him into some trouble initially with our program where he was sober a period of time and then he got locked back up because he was using. And since then he has made remarkable strides in getting himself together. He has two probation officers, which he sees them faithfully. He has a bus card, which allows him the freedom to get to those appointments without depending on us anymore. He can manage his meds, although he had difficulty in the beginning with understanding which meds was which. We helped him to establish a medi-pack so he knows how to take those meds when he’s supposed to take them. Currently his housing is stable. So, if he does leave the group home facility for an extended period of time, they feel comfortable with giving him his medication to take with him, knowing that he’ll take them when he’s supposed to take them. And all of this was made possible through [the FACT team]. We work on the premise of four quarters toward independence where, over the year, every three months we update [clients] on their progress towards their independence. And if the things that they can do to help them foster that independence, we encourage them. If there’s something where they need a little bit of support or need us there, we’ll assist them with that. But, in the beginning, we help them to understand that we’re going to be there to support them, to help foster their independence. And, like I said, this individual has made tremendous strides. And he is actually, I think, one of the success stories of this team.”*

Another staff member shared:

*“I’ve watched a guy who went from being menacing and carrying a knife under his coat and he smelled horrible and not talking to any of us, not*

taking meds...[to a man able to have] intelligent conversation. He actually asks how other people are doing. He's goal directed. And he's doing what we ask.

### Effect on Themselves

All staff members expressed that their work was both challenging and rewarding. Some shared stories about how they had changed their perspectives and thoughts because of their involvement with FACT. For example, one staff member shared:

*“What’s been striking for me is when I took the job I thought “I’m going to be working with murderers, rapists, sex offenders.” Wow. That sounds scary, doesn’t it? But there’s humanity in a lot of these folks...Once you do reach them, they’ve got more in common with me than I thought they would. I mean, they’re not as threatening or violent or scary as they were once. I’m sure they’ll still have their moments. The antennae are always up. But these folks are just like you and me in some way.*

The staff members from a number of teams commented on how FACT affected them professionally and affected their teams and agencies. Many stories revolved around the team focus of FACT. For example, one staff member said:

*“I like the daily meetings where you get the heads up from other people. I like the fact that someone else is actually working with that person. I can remember sitting in meetings just thinking, I’m trying to explain this person’s need and the responses I’m getting from my teammates are very—they really want to help but they just can’t see the problem and I can’t seem to—it’s just something you can’t quite describe. I mean [with FACT], you have...[another] teammate [who] has actually been there and done that same thing and knows that problem, then you get this heads up from these other people who really know the situation and have a different perspective.*

The team focus of FACT also seems to help staff members deal with stress and burnout among staff, as illustrated by this staff member’s comment:

*“I think it’s the team is set up, it’s almost like checks and balances. You can very easily [get] caught up in the chaos in their lives. And the team is very good at saying “okay, let’s try to remove you a little bit from that chaos and see what the problem is.” I think we’re all, by nature, just very giving and caring and want to help everyone. So, it is very easy to take on too much of that responsibility and just really internalize it and let it take over your life. It could happen very easily.*

FACT staff also saw changes in their organizations, especially around the organization’s relationship with other systems and knowledge of the issues consumers face. One staff member shared:

*“Somewhat from an organizational perspective before the existence of this team, I think our contacts, our agency’s contact with the criminal justice system...was extremely limited. And because of the team, it really started when everyone started to build bridges and make contact with a variety of folks in the criminal justice system and being much more acutely aware of the amount of contact our clients [had]...it really opened our eyes to...how complex the issues were.*

### Effect on the Community

All FACT staff commented on how their relationships with their communities and other providers and stakeholders, particularly criminal justice system representatives, have improved. For example, one staff member shared:

*“Our name is known not only in the courts but also in agencies that know that if [clients are] on the ACT Team, probation, and everything else, then the agency providers are more comfortable knowing they’re on our team. And there’s confidence about that that there was never before. So, I think that probably is the biggest change from the beginning of the ACT Team to the one we have now, a year and a half later.*

Staff have also seen changes in community stigma towards people with mental illnesses as a result of the FACT team's work. As one staff member shared:

*“Yeah, I think stigma is definitely reduced a lot, especially in this area. But, being a rural area, there's not a lot of employment opportunities to begin with. There's not any type of halfway houses or anything like that. Like we said, we've developed very good relationships with local landlords. There's a couple local factories that will usually hire people. So, I think for what we have available to us, we've done really well.”*

Another staff member said:

*“I've been told by a lot of people that are local who see me at the restaurant or down at the [local market], many times, “I'm glad you're here. There just wasn't anything for people who had mental health problems here before you guys came.”*

In particular, many staff members saw improvements in the relationship between the mental health and criminal justice systems because of the efforts of their FACT teams. As one staff member said:

*“I think the collaboration with the criminal justice system is much better, especially in [our] area. They're very open to the kind of treatment because they're very happy to see the outcomes that we get. They're always willing to help us in any way that they can. They're very open to seeing us in their jails or in their courtrooms.”*

Another staff member shared:

*“I think that this team, in particular, has helped us to formally build relationships with people in the criminal justice system and really get a lot more knowledge and understanding of how to negotiate different kinds of criminal justice situations, how to negotiate in court and understand the kind of broader criminal justice system.”*

## Voices of the Community

The community stakeholders who participated in the study had much to say about the impact of FACT on their communities. The stakeholders that the researchers interviewed included a local mental health funding board member, a judge, probation officers, a housing specialist, and a residential treatment facility director. A number of stakeholders shared observations of consumers in their communities who have been served by FACT, including this story:

*“[There was] a female in her mid-twenties, a very bright, very intelligent young lady. [She had] life skills and the ability as far as choices, [but] she basically had no, for lack of a better phrase, no common sense. She would live for the moment, which got her into drug abuse and put on probation [because of] theft, drug charges, things of that nature. About a year and a half, two years ago, we actually got her into the ACT program. I think she's relapsed a couple of times, [but] it's a substantial turnaround. I mean, you know, we've had a few cases where she's backslipped, but that's to be expected. But they weren't major slides. You know, they were just minor, brief little instances where, you know, attitude or just outward emotion got the best of her. But she has done a complete turnaround...I know she's got some depression and anxiety issues and some other mental health issues, [but she is now] able to handle and understand why she needs to control those issues. And her legal issues have almost disappeared. I mean she's, without a doubt, probably the best success story I've got with the ACT team.”*

Other stakeholders realize not everyone can be a success but still support the FACT team. For example, one stakeholder admitted:

*“I will say this. I am still a cynic at times with some of these folks and I've said “we're going to refer this guy to you. Good luck.” And I've seen [that person], a year later, [and] say “You know what? I really can't believe that that's happened.” That's not everybody. That's realistic. But there have been folks where I've said “I'm amazed. You look good,” those success stories.”*

Stakeholders also commented on the skills and attitudes of the FACT staff members and how these staff members have made the jobs of stakeholders easier. The stakeholders also clearly appreciated the FACT staff members. As one stakeholder said:

*“There’s no, I don’t want to say “judgment” but there’s no preconceived view. When I send somebody in, they take that person for face value and then they go from there. I mean, the personnel they have with the people I work with down there in [the] ACT team are extraordinary.*

Another stakeholder talked about the benefits of having a FACT team that could address a variety of consumer needs:

*“I think the advantages of having ACT is that they tend to work on a team and so if...one of my clients has a need and the case manager, primary case manager is off with another situation, then the team usually gets involved. And I think that’s a huge advantage. It appears, from being a stakeholder, it appears to me that most people on the team are at least, at minimum, aware of a client. Certainly, the primary ones are going to have more knowledge. But, you know, they’re aware enough what the triggers are and what to look for and they’re very helpful. They can communicate to us and we don’t have to wait, necessarily, for somebody to call us back.*

Another stakeholder reflected on what things were like before FACT was implemented and how things had changed since the team started.

*“It was almost impossible, really [before the team]. Ever since they started this team, it’s made our job a lot easier really...I mean, we’re not treatment providers. We’re supervising officers...consumers are not going to open up to us because of that.*

## Themes from the Stories

The consumer interviews illustrated two things particular clearly. First, the FACT team engaged a number of consumers while those consumers were still incarcerated. These consumers commented that FACT rescued them from life threatening situations.

Assertive outreach and engagement is a critical part of FACT and often this engagement occurs in jails or prisons where providers can not bill for Medicaid, the largest payer of mental health services today. Thus, FACT teams, especially new teams trying to grow their caseloads, should be planned and financed in such a way that non-billable activities can be absorbed. This may be a significant challenge for developing and sustaining FACT teams that will need to be overcome.

Second, justice-involved consumers have profound needs and require an intensive and comprehensive set of services as they transition from jails and prisons into the community. FACT teams must be prepared to offer a wide array of services, including transportation, housing, help with benefit applications or reinstatement, substance abuse counseling, medication management, daily living skills, and others. The teams must also have flexible funds that can be used to rent an apartment or turn on utilities in order to make it easier for a person to enter the community within the first several days or weeks following release from jail or prison. Spacing case intake and staffing teams appropriately so that new cases can be managed successfully will be critical for FACT teams.

Stories from FACT staff members suggest that ACT appears to be an excellent model to serve high-risk, high-need consumers. Staff appear to benefit from the shared caseload and responsibility of the team approach. The shared caseload approach is critical to manage and process challenging cases, share responsibility for case successes and failures and prevent burnout among staff.

Moreover, the team-based approach of FACT may be well-suited to interacting with the multiple players associated with the criminal justice system. FACT teams have the potential to be responsive, communicative, and visible to probation and parole officers, correctional officers, sheriffs, district attorneys, and judges, which could go a long way towards erasing historical tensions and mistrust between the mental health and criminal justice systems. Further, the interviews with FACT staff show that staff can work through their fears of justice-involved consumers towards an understanding that justice-involved people with severe mental illnesses are people in need of help and who have great potential for recovery.

The interviews with stakeholders illustrated some of the visible and remarkable effects that FACT teams can have on the communities in which they reside and the consumers that they serve. Comments from criminal justice stakeholders are particularly noteworthy in that they reflect appreciation for the hard work of the FACT teams in serving the most high risk consumers. The interviews with the stakeholders also highlighted greater collaboration between systems that were once antagonists, reduced stigma for consumers, and greater opportunities for housing and other services as the result of FACT.

The purpose of the exploratory qualitative study from which these quotes were taken was to better understand ACT from the perspectives of consumers, staff, and community stakeholders. The results from FACT teams add to the small but growing literature base about FACT. This is also the first study to explore the effects of FACT from the perspectives of consumers, staff and community stakeholders.

However, this study does have limitations. The sample included consumers, staff members, and stakeholders from four FACT teams in Ohio; thus, the extent to which these findings can be generalized to all FACT teams across the country is unclear. And, it may be likely that the sample of consumers who participated in the study was made up of consumers who were doing well. The perspectives of consumers who were not doing well despite involvement in FACT may not have been included here.

FACT is one of the most recent adaptations of ACT. The evidence that FACT can reduce recidivism and improve quality of life for persons with severe mental illness who are incarcerated in jails and prisons is not well developed, however, and more research is needed to address a number of questions about FACT. However, based on the stories of consumers, staff, and stakeholders, FACT has the potential to change the lives of consumers and benefit communities.

## About The Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati

Since 1997, The Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati has invested over \$111 million to address health needs in the 20-county region surrounding Cincinnati. The majority of our work falls within our four focus areas: Community Primary Care, School-Aged Children's Healthcare, Substance Use Disorders, and Severe Mental Illness.

We help create enduring projects that will improve health, and grantee sustainability is vital to our mission. We help grantees move toward sustainability by offering workshops, staff consultations, and other technical assistance. We also help grantees find other funders who might be interested in their work.

For more information about the Health Foundation and our grantmaking interests, capacity building programs for nonprofits, and publications, please contact us at 513-458-6600, toll-free at 888-310-4904, or visit our web site at [www.healthfoundation.org](http://www.healthfoundation.org).

*The*  
**Health  
Foundation**  
*of Greater Cincinnati*  
Rookwood Tower  
3805 Edwards Road, Suite 500  
Cincinnati, OH 45209-1948  
513.458.6600 [TF] 888.310.4904  
[www.healthfoundation.org](http://www.healthfoundation.org)