

St. Christopher's Inn is a community-based substance abuse provider serving the greater New York Metropolitan area and surrounding counties since 1908. The "Inn" began as a wayfarer's respite for travelers, and evolved into a shelter for men suffering from addiction.

St. Christopher's Inn Counselor among the first to be certified as a NIATx Change Leader

Thomas King has worn many hats at St. Christopher's Inn. A credentialed alcohol and substance abuse counselor and also affiliated with the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists, King began working in the field in 1989. With a passion for helping people who suffer from substance abuse and/or mental illness, King has also had the opportunity to develop new programs at St. Christopher's, including a structured family program and an intensive outpatient program.

In 2003, as a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Paths to Recovery grantee, St. Christopher's Inn became a member of the Network for the Improvement of Addiction Treatment (NIATx). Along with almost 40 other treatment agencies across the nation, St. Christopher's Inn participated in the NIATx process improvement collaborative network, receiving expert coaching and peer learning support to implement systemic changes to improve access to and retention in treatment.

"After we became a NIATx member, I was very excited to be part of the first Change Teams at St. Christopher's Inn" says King. "I had worked at other organizations in the field that were resistant to change. With the grant we were able to look at our programs with an objective eye to identify things that needed improvement."

An initial process improvement exercise at St. Christopher's Inn focused on increasing admissions. A key component of that process was examining the organization's phone system. "We realized that a lot of calls were coming in at lunch time when no one was available to answer the phones," comments King. By staggering lunch times, the agency was able to increase the number of phone calls that were answered live. With fewer missed calls, the agency saw an increase in admissions as well.

While King had participated on St. Christopher's process improvement Change Teams, he had not led a team himself. When NIATx offered its first Change Leader Academy in spring 2006, King was excited at the opportunity to gain additional training.

The NIATx Change Leader Academy began with a two-day workshop in March 2006. Nearly 50 substance abuse professionals came together in Madison, Wisconsin, to learn the fundamentals of process improvement. Each participant received an assignment—to return to his or her organization and launch a Change Project, serving as Change Leader.

"When I was asked to pick a Change Initiative, I picked something that would be easy to change—the "no-show" rate for the evening outpatient clinic. The baseline measure showed that we had a 40 percent no-show rate for assessments. To improve that, my team

and I implemented reminder calls 24 hours before the assessment and follow-up calls 24 hours after the appointment. And the no-show rate dropped to zero.”

Success with the first Change Project gave King the confidence to tackle a more challenging issue for a second Change Project: how to improve the continuation rate among men admitted for St. Christopher’s residential treatment program. “St. Christopher’s Inn is run by the Franciscan Friars of Atonement, whose mission is to provide food, shelter, and clothing for the needy. Homeless men admitted here can start a 90-day residential treatment program, or they can choose just to stay for shelter for 21 days. We noticed that many of our new admissions—about 35 percent—were leaving after the first 72 hours. So our second Change Project attempted to correct that.”

Strategies that King’s Change Team tested to increase continuation included a peer mentoring or “buddy” system. “When we saw that the buddy system was helping, we also tested another change, which was to give our new admits a “treatment menu”—basically, detailed information on what to expect during the course of their stay.” With those two changes, King’s team was able to reduce the number of new admits leaving treatment early to 25 percent.

While King and his team conducted the Change Projects, King kept in touch with his classmates from the Change Leader Academy through monthly teleconferences. In these calls, King was able to share his successes and challenges with other Change Leaders-in-training. “The regular calls really helped support my efforts as a Change Leader,” says King. “It helped tremendously to hear what others were experiencing.”

The first NIATx Change Leader Academy concluded with a second Madison workshop in September 2006. “Overall, the NIATx Change Leader Academy was a great opportunity for professional and personal development and it really helped me learn ways to look at my organization with an eye for process improvement,” King concludes.