

Taking the Long Way Home

Hazel's Story

In high school, Hazel found a sanctuary away from the chaos at home. She spent long days at school getting good grades and enjoying time with friends. She went to parties and worked odd jobs at local businesses. The money she earned provided independence and freedom.

However, at the same time, she began experiencing sudden mood swings, and had difficulty controlling her emotions. Some of her relationships suffered. She had trouble sleeping, was impulsive, experienced anxiety, and had episodes of deep sadness and fatigue. She was prone to self-destructive behavior and impulses of self-harm. Her internal battle took a toll over the years and she was unable to hold a job for longer than a year. Hazel didn't know it at the time, but she had inherited a mental illness and was vulnerable to addiction.

If you or someone you know has a mental illness, there are ways to find help.

Visit <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline> to find resources for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders.

Call **1-800-662-HELP** (4357) or **1-800-487-4889** (TTY).



"My illness spiraled and took hold in its worst form," she recalls. "I was drinking and addicted to drugs... I knew that this time something was very wrong."

Hazel was diagnosed with multiple conditions that included Borderline Personality Disorder, Depression, Generalized Anxiety, Substance Use Disorder and Alcohol Use Disorder. It was the first time her difficulties were explained and given names. It wasn't good news, but these diagnoses suggested a path forward.

"I was unhappy for such a long time," she recalls. "When I went to sleep at night, I prayed God would take me."

Life Raft

In 2013, Hazel entered a drug and alcohol treatment program where the doctors helped her find effective medicines and therapies. It was the right combination of treatments for Hazel. By the end of the year, she had given up alcohol and drugs.

Hazel felt better than she had in years. A counselor from Hazel's recovery center connected her to **Polaris House**, a **clubhouse community** dedicated to helping its members recover from mental illness. Some **International Clubhouses** like Polaris offer opportunities for friendship, employment, housing, education and referral to medical and psychiatric services in a caring and safe environment. She later found mental health professionals who helped her manage her disorders, and counselors who helped her apply for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). These professionals continue to be part of Hazel's support team and play a vital role in helping her maintain wellness.

"When I became a member of Polaris House, I volunteered in the kitchen at first so I didn't have to be around too many people. I was still vulnerable," she recalls. "I came in every day because it was a safe place where they understood me. There were others there like me who understood what I was going through."

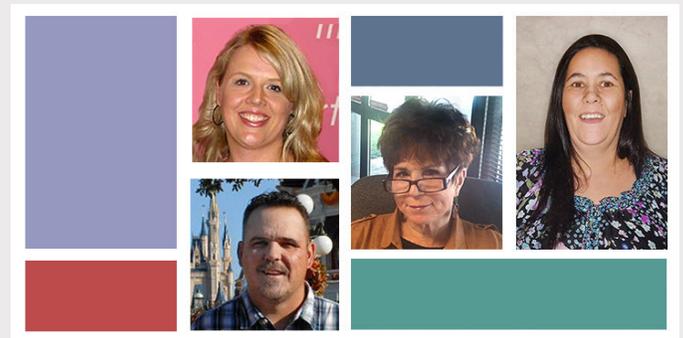
For the first time, Hazel found a place where she had meaningful work and a community where she belonged. After 6 months of volunteer service, she was put on the payroll part-time.

"I was needed there," she says. "Being needed and valued are a life line... Polaris House has been a sanctuary."

Mental illness and Social Security

Approximately one-third of all people who receive Social Security Disability Benefits (SSDI/SSI) receive them due to a mental illness(es).

While it is not the solution for everyone, work can play a key role in managing and recovering from a mental illness. Check out our other success stories about **Cherie**, **Brenda** and **others** to see how employment was their path to recovery.



By the end of 2014, Polaris House offered Hazel full-time employment as a Club House Generalist, a job with many facets. Generalists are familiar with multiple aspects of running a Clubhouse and in some cases, take on leadership roles. It was a great opportunity for Hazel. She was confident she would enjoy the work.

"They believed in me," she reflects. "...and I haven't had a whole lot of that in my life."

Hazel knew that her disorders are chronic and had concerns about what would happen if her disabilities interfered with work after earnings put a stop to her SSDI and Medicare. Hazel's self-confidence had already improved, but the risk of losing the benefits she relied on gave her pause.

Ticket to Work and Work Incentives

As Hazel weighed the risks and rewards of full-time work, Windy Swearingin, a counselor at **Alaska's American Job Center** (a community partner of Polaris House) told her about Social Security's **Ticket to Work (Ticket) Program** and other **Work Incentives** and how full-time employment would affect her benefits. Hazel learned she would not suddenly lose her benefits. She would have time to determine how full-time employment would work for her.

Because of a Work Incentive called **Expedited Reinstatement**, if Hazel had to stop working due to her disability, she could request to have her benefits reinstated without having to complete a new application and she'd be eligible to receive temporary benefits for up to 6 months.

Through the Ticket Program, employment service providers like Alaska's American Job Center (AJC) offer a range of free support services to help people prepare for, find or maintain employment. **The Ticket Program is voluntary and helps people progress toward financial independence through work. Adults ages 18 through 64 who receive Social Security disability benefits qualify.**

Work Incentives make it easier for adults with disabilities to explore work and still receive Medicare/Medicaid and Social Security disability benefits. These Work Incentives are designed to ease the transition to work. Because each person's circumstances are different, people who want to work should connect with a **Benefits Counselor**.

Hazel is grateful for the ongoing support she receives from her EN. "Windy is a godsend," she says. "She answers all of my questions

What's a Benefits Counselor?

If you receive Social Security disability benefits (SSDI/SSI) and are considering returning to work, or working for the first time, you may be wondering how your earnings will affect your benefits. Benefits counseling is a free service offered by many Ticket to Work service providers to explain how working will affect your federal and state benefits.

[Read more.](#)

about employment and benefits, goes with me to the Social Security Office, and offers much needed encouragement. Knowing [she] is there to help means one less thing for me to worry about."

Sharing Recovery

It's been 6 years since Hazel took those first tentative steps into the Polaris House's kitchen as a volunteer. She has since traded her SSDI benefit for a larger paycheck; overcome addiction; learned how to manage her mental health; and helped countless others find their way. Hazel uses lessons from her own experience to provide authentic, effective guidance to Clubhouse members.

"There are few things more gratifying than helping someone else avoid the same traps that almost killed me," she says. "This job saved my life. Employment brought about a real turning point for me. It has been such a critical part of my recovery. Make no mistake...recovery is something you give away every day. The work I do here allows me to share my recovery with those who need it most."

Hazel has taken on leadership roles at Polaris House and in her community. Her work with local organizations (including the Coalition of Housing and Homelessness and Alaska Women Against Domestic Violence) earned her a community award in 2020.

While preparing Thanksgiving dinner, Hazel reflected on how far she has come, and on the things that she is thankful for.

“For the first time in my life I don’t have to depend on a government check. I pay my own bills. I drive my own car. I have my own place,” she muses. “I have people who need and appreciate me, the respect of the community... and I have integrity. I’m proud to say I can afford that!”

Ticket to Work helped Hazel find her path to a better future. **Find yours!**



Whether you are just considering working, ready to find a service provider to help you, looking for a job or already working and want to keep on the road to financial independence, the Ticket Program is here to help.

To learn more, call the Ticket to Work Help Line at **1-866-968-7842; 1-866-833-2967** (TTY), M-F 8 a.m. - 8 p.m. ET, or visit **choosework.ssa.gov**.

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