After his father's death, a Boston rap artist joined the front lines of the addiction recovery movement

Peer recovery coaches have emerged as a growing force in the state's fight against addiction and overdoses.

By **Chris Serres** Globe Staff, Updated April 30, 2025, 4:24 a.m.

Eric Henderson is on a mission to help those struggling with addiction in Greater Boston. Henderson (left), paid a visit with Caise Oliver from Acushnet at the Bedrock Recovery Center where he is struggling with his cocaine addiction. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

As a child, Eric Henderson was desperate to be accepted by the guys on his corner. His first arrest was for brawling at a shopping mall at 11. When his fellow gang members on Fayston Street in Roxbury wanted to intimidate a rival, it was Henderson, then a teenager, who would volunteer to fire the gun or drive the getaway car. On the streets, his exploits earned him the nickname "Fame."

Like many others in his group, Henderson ended up addicted to cocaine and heroin, and spent much of his early adulthood bouncing from prison to the

streets.

Then came a crushing blow. On April 9, 2011, Henderson arrived home to discover his father's body lying face down, motionless, on his bed. This initial horror was followed by another: That some potent pills Henderson had stashed in his bedroom had been opened. An autopsy later revealed the pills had triggered his father's fatal heart attack.

"The bottom fell out of me," Henderson said. "I had to live with the guilt that I had killed my own father."

Devastated, Henderson forged a new path. He is now free from his addiction and among hundreds of former users joining the ranks of certified peer recovery coaches, nonmedical experts who rely on their past experiences to motivate clients to keep away from alcohol and drugs.

After decades operating on the margins of the substance use treatment industry, recovery coaches are increasingly being integrated into mainstream medicine as the state works to stem the tide of overdose deaths, a crisis that has claimed more than 20,000 lives in Massachusetts in the past decade. The number of coaches has grown in recent years and is expected to swell even more as Massachusetts moves later this year to implement a new law that formally establishes peer recovery coaching as a licensed profession and requires all health plans, public and private, to pay for the services.

A growing chorus of research studies has found that peer recovery coaches produce a wide range of positive outcomes, from greater housing stability to reduced rates of relapse and hospitalizations. A 2020 study found that, for patients with substance use disorder, hospitalizations fell 44 percent in the six months after they were paired with a recovery coach, and visits to primary care providers increased 66 percent.

The coaches are often the first specialists to intervene when people make a decision to get their lives back on track after years of substance abuse. They step in and connect people with addiction counselors and physicians who can prescribe medications for curbing cravings, such as buprenorphine or methadone.

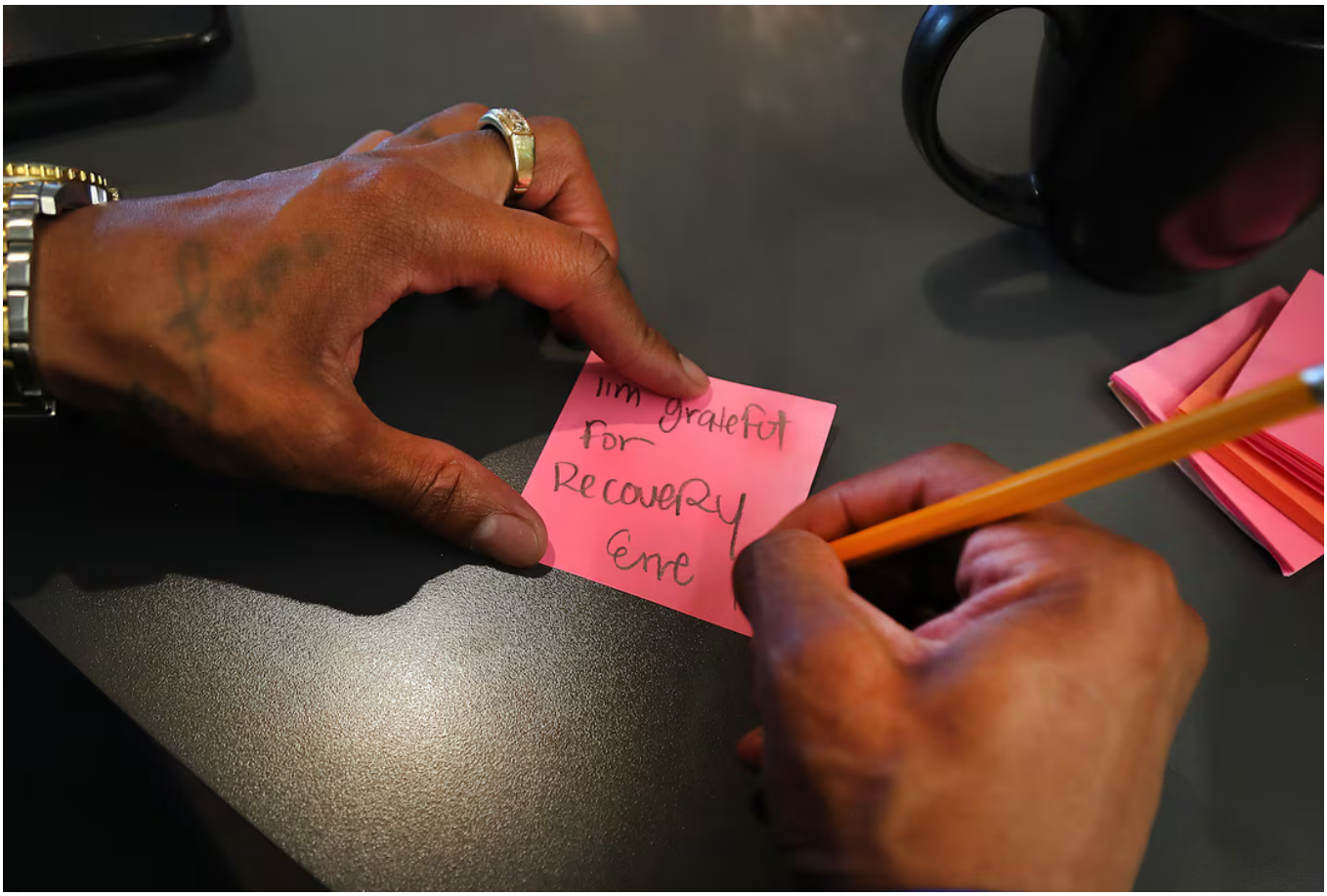
“Ideally, a recovery coach is that one person who will follow you everywhere, through all the lapses and relapses,” said David DeCourcey, a recovery coach supervisor with the Gavin Foundation, which provides peer recovery services at centers in more than 100 cities and towns statewide. “When everyone else gives up on you, we’ll still be there.”

Most of what Henderson does lies outside the expertise of clinicians. Some days, he will guide a client through the complex bureaucracy of finding stable

housing, help someone enroll for health benefits or replace lost IDs, or find them work through his roster of contacts.

At times, the job involves meeting people at the worst moments of their lives, Henderson noted. It can be at the bedside of someone in a hospital after they have overdosed. In a homeless shelter after being kicked out of a sober home for a failed urine test. At a jail or courthouse when someone is picked up on a warrant for drug charges. Or in a vehicle en route to a detox or treatment center.

“For me, all that matters is, how do we get you out of the hole that you’re in,” Henderson said. “If you’re not dead, you always have a chance.”



Eric Henderson was known as Fame and still has the tattoo on his left hand as he signed a post-it to put in a gratitude jar at the Phoenix Gym and Community Center in South Boston. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Eric Henderson chilled out at the Phoenix Gym and Community Center in South Boston. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

There are no reliable data on recovery coaches in Massachusetts, but there is evidence that demand for their services is growing amid a persistent overdose crisis.

Increasingly, hospital systems have been tapping their expertise to help people navigate outpatient care after being hospitalized for substance use-related illnesses or overdoses. And recognizing the need, the state Bureau of Substance Addiction Services has funded a network of free, drop-in peer recovery centers across the state, adding a dozen such centers since 2023.

Yet the field is growing at a tenuous time for providers of the service. Many organizations that train and employ peer recovery coaches rely at least in part on federal health grants to operate. And that funding is now in peril as the Trump administration has attempted to slash nearly $1 billion from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, a branch of the federal government that provides funding to states to support addiction treatment.

While those grant cuts have been put on hold by a federal judge, providers are bracing for a period of austerity.

For now, Henderson has been too busy supporting his 28 clients — sometimes working up to 60 hours a week — to worry about federal funding cuts.

On a brisk April afternoon, the 14th anniversary of his father's death, Henderson was weaving his SUV around a dense pocket of apartment blocks in South Boston, scouring the streets for a client who goes by the nickname "Spider." The 61-year-old man was struggling to get his life back on track after years of alcohol and cocaine use. Some days, Henderson finds Spider out here, walking the streets, and offers to take him out for free coffee or lunch.

On this day, Spider, whose real name is Leonardo Johnson, happened to be waiting for Henderson in a sunlit meeting room at the Devine Recovery Center, a bustling hub for much of Dorchester's recovery community, where Henderson works.

The two men immediately embraced, pulled up chairs and launched into a conversation that gradually veered toward Spider's main concern: A recent relapse.

"I have a routine, you know, but it seems like every few months I want to go swimming again," said Johnson, referring to his drug use. "And then when I get in deep water and I feel myself trying to . . ." his voice trailed off, "float back to the shore."

"And you come back here!" Henderson replied, grinning.

Henderson then fixed his gaze on Johnson and calmly suggested that he begin a 12-step program similar to the approach used by Alcoholics Anonymous. In this approach, people with addiction acknowledge that their lives have become unmanageable and make amends to those they have wronged. While Henderson wouldn't supervise Johnson in the program, he could connect him to one.

"But I don't need instructions," Johnson said, pushing back. "That's how I see it."

"Spider I love you, but we need to get you to the point of doing the 12 steps so

we don’t keep having these recurrences,” Henderson said.

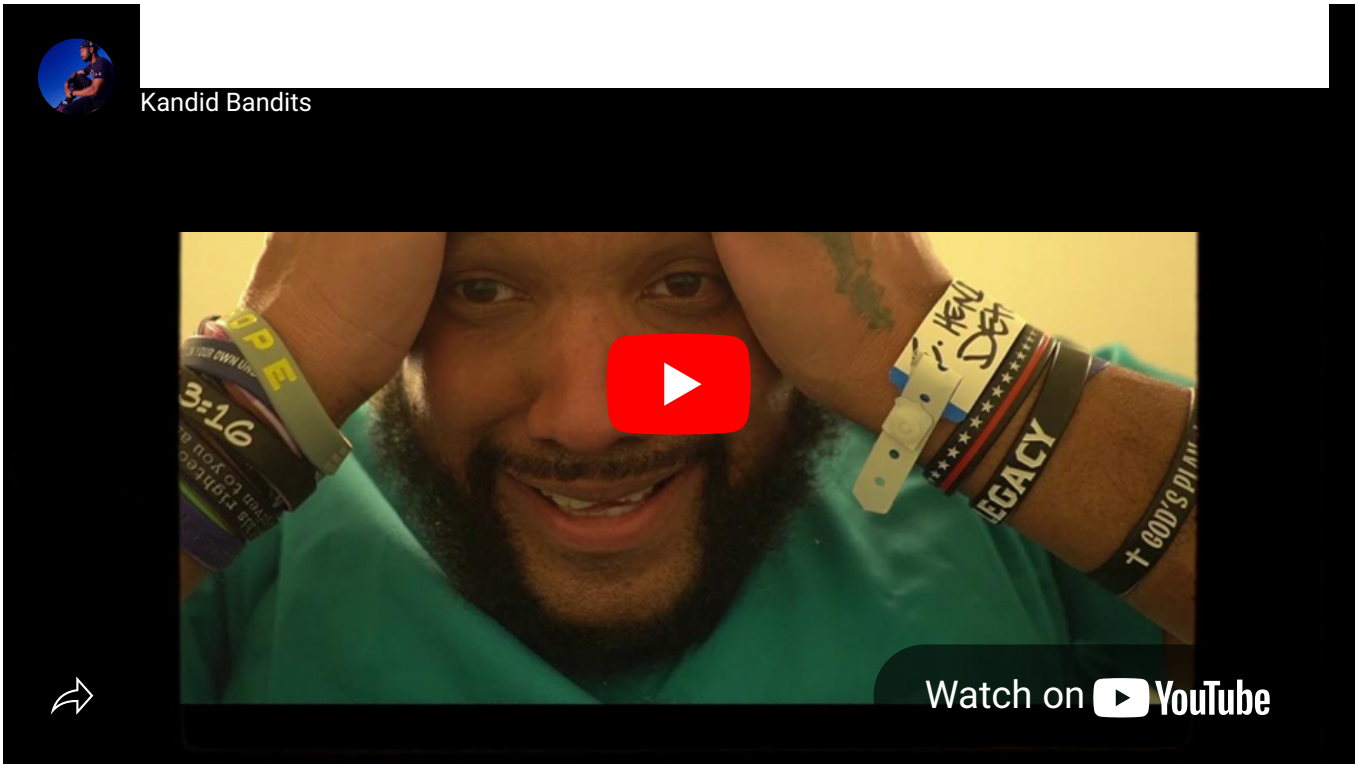
Eric Henderson (right), listened to client Leonardo Johnson, 61 of Boston at the Devine Recovery Center. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Johnson tugged the strings of his sweatshirt before eventually nodding in agreement. “Honestly I don’t want to use because I’m not myself, right? Not the person I am today sitting across from you.”

Similar to many of his clients, Henderson’s own recovery journey has not been easy. He resolved to get sober soon after his father’s death, but the guilt and remorse often became unbearable. Without a peer to guide him, Henderson fell into a perpetual cycle of treatment and relapse, of shuttling between programs and court hearings for petty drug offenses. He relapsed 16 times before finally

checking himself into a detox center in 2019 and joining a 12-step program.

Now determined to stay clean, Henderson poured himself into his lifelong passion for music and now performs in major clubs and festivals all over Massachusetts. Henderson settled on the rap name “Exit Fame” to reflect the clean break he made from his days as a street tough.



“I came to the realization that I actually need to *exit me*, that whole street persona, and just be Eric," he said. “The name is a healthy reminder to stay out of the ego.”

Reflecting on his journey, Henderson wishes the surge in recovery coaching had come much earlier. At challenging moments, Henderson said he had no one with lived experience encouraging him to stay strong and holding him

accountable.

“Had I had a recovery coach to empower me, I could’ve been sober years earlier,” he said. “But it’s gratifying to see how much this profession has evolved, and how thousands of folks are getting help that I never imagined.”

As he drove north on Interstate 93 in Boston, on his way to meet a client at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Henderson rolled down his car window and began reciting the lyrics to one of his more personal songs — "Drug Addiction Part 1."

“I was in a war

Knockin’ on the devil’s door …’

Henderson is presently on step four of the 12-step program, writing an exhaustive moral inventory of all his fears, regrets, and resentments.

He jots them down in a slender blue notebook that he carries between

meetings.

Each day, he fills another page. He doesn't know when or whether the entries will end.

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