



*The Orange County Office of the State Council on Developmental Disabilities is re-launching our Self-Advocate Speaker Series, inspired by SCDD Orange County Regional Advisory Committee (RAC) Member Drew Smith, a local self-advocate who launched the series. This segment will feature Orange County self-advocates who are entrepreneurs, board members impacting the OC community, and change agents. These are their stories in their own words.*

## **Meet Johnice Williams**



My name is Johnice Williams and I am the co-founder of Peer Voices of Orange County (PVOC). I am a Saddleback College student pursuing certifications in Mental Health Worker and Alcohol and Drug Studies and a crisis counselor with CalHOPE. I have been active in the behavioral health community since 2016. Because I was not receiving the adequate assistance in 2015 from health care system, I had to do some investigating on what to do from my health. With everything I was learning, I would educate my doctors and providers. I would always walk around with a backpack full of information to pass out not just to the doctors, but to people on the bus, centers, anywhere I could. I don't feel that no one should have to work as hard as I do to find resources, seek help, feel heard. Our communities should know that they are being heard and see the changes of what they have voiced.

I started attending Wellness Center West in Garden Grove in 2016. In 2017, I started attending Recovery Education Institute (REI) and I became a student at Saddleback College. I also became a member at Wellness Center Central in Orange in 2017. I introduced myself with a speech to the behavioral health community in October 2019 at the MHSA Steering Committee. In September 2020, Peer Voices of Orange County was formed with the help of Mind OC and MECCA OC at the Be Well Coalition Meeting. We have conducted 3 Community Engagement Meetings in the beginning of 2021. We are recognized by CAMHPRO for being the only peer-run organization in Orange County. We are partnered with MECCA OC since April 2021 to become Crisis Counselors. October 2021, we hosted a 2-day Southern Regional forum with CAMHPRO. There were 10 counties that attended each day.

On December 18, 2019, I attended a Be Well Coalition with Orlando Vera. That day changed our lives as they were looking for community help to grow this project. We attended several of the different Be Well Result Area meetings, even after they went to Zoom. Having an organization was not in our plans, but because we attended meetings and spoke up, Mind OC and MECCA OC saw that we were leaders in the behavioral health community and have provided assistance to grow Peer Voices of Orange County (PVOC). I also want to note that the Be Well Orange Campus has proof that peers were heard. Our words and color schemes are all over the campus. This will be here for years to come and I am proud to have been part of this process.

We not only showed up, but we spoke up. I go to the MHSA Steering Committee meetings and Behavioral Health Advisory Board (BHAB) meetings. I attend most meetings for Be Well Result Areas, Connect OC, Anaheim Human Services, CAMHPRO, SCDD and several workshops and webinars all to gain knowledge of our community and see where I am needed. I feel it my responsibility to know what is going on in my community. Every meeting, webinar, conference I attend gives me more information to help our community. I know that I cannot learn everything but I am gonna try!

Starting an organization or small business can be challenging, but we have so much support! I know how to run an office that already exist, but never started one from the ground up. Both Mind OC and MECCA OC continue to provide assistance anytime we ask. I have attended LOTS of webinars, meetings and classes pertaining to operating a business. I will always be a student, it makes me feel more empowered in every aspect of my life. I love to share my knowledge and resources. I love seeing the results it has on a person and/or family as well as health care providers when I share my knowledge.

I have some advice for others looking to become involved. I have become more vulnerable the more I get involved with my community. Right now is the time to get involved in our community. Attend county behavioral health board meetings either in-person or on Zoom. Find out where there are activities providing resources for our community. Don't stop speaking up for yourself and/or your family member. If you are not able to speak up, find someone who can speak on your behalf. You do matter and you will be heard.

To learn more about Peers Voices of Orange County, visit at: <https://peervoices.org/>  
Connect with PVOC via email at [info@peervoices.org](mailto:info@peervoices.org)

Are you interested in being featured in our Self-Advocate Speaker Series? Perhaps you are a family member and would like to highlight the accomplishments of your loved one? Or you may be a professional working with someone you would like featured in the series.

For more information and to participate, follow the link below:

<https://bit.ly/SASpeakerSeriesSurvey>