



# Council of Lived Experience (COLE)

*The First Three Months*

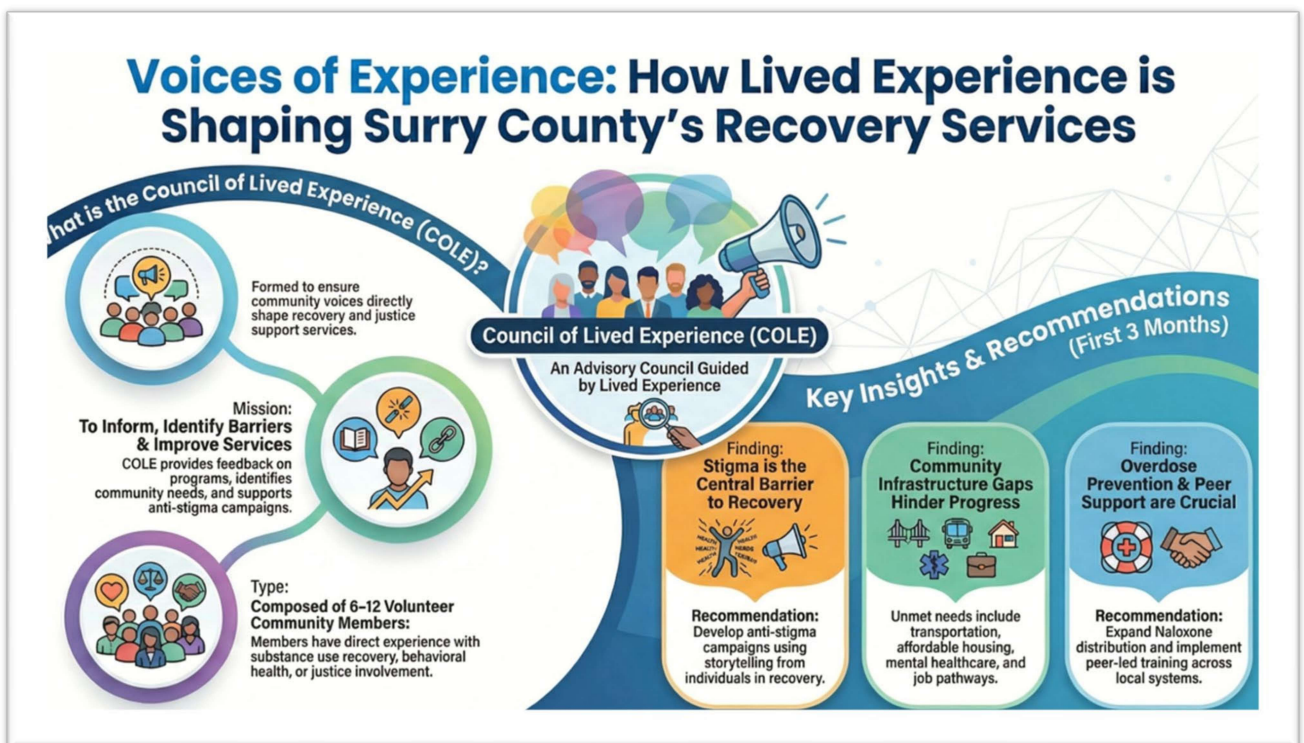
**Surry County Office of Substance Abuse Recovery (SCOSAR)**

**Inaugural Year – September 2025 to December 2025  
Prepared For Surry County Stakeholders and Community Partners**

# I. Executive Summary

The Council of Lived Experience (COLE) is a newly established advisory body housed within the Surry County Office of Substance Abuse Recovery (SCOSAR). Formed in September 2025, COLE elevates the voices of individuals with direct experience in recovery from substance use, behavioral health challenges, incarceration, and other significant life hardships. The council provides guidance, insight, and recommendations to SCOSAR leadership to enhance the relevance, accessibility, and effectiveness of local recovery and justice support services.

COLE meets monthly, is composed of 6–10 volunteer members, and operates as an unpaid advisory group. This report summarizes COLE’s mission, structure, operational processes, and the first three months of activity—including meeting summaries, themes, recommendations, and early impact.



## II. Background and Historical Context

COLE originated from a recognized need in Surry County for stronger integration of lived experience perspectives in shaping local recovery initiatives, justice-involved services, and opioid settlement–funded programs.

### **Key milestones:**

- August 11, 2025: COLE formally announced in a countywide press release.
- August 2025: Recruitment begins through an online interest form and targeted outreach.
- September 2025: First meetings held at SCOSAR in Dobson, NC and via Zoom
- 2025 onward: Annual rotation of members is planned to widen community representation and maintain authentic lived-experience leadership.

COLE builds on SCOSAR's broader strategic efforts, including the Surry Strategic Framework 2030, anti-stigma initiatives, and Recovery-to-Work programming.

### III. Mission and Purpose

The mission of COLE is to ensure that individuals impacted by addiction, behavioral health challenges, incarceration, or similar life experiences have a formal voice in shaping Surry County's recovery and justice support services.

**Core Purposes:**

- Inform SCOSAR's programs, priorities, and policies.
- Identify community needs and barriers from lived-experience perspectives.
- Provide ongoing feedback to improve accessibility and service relevance.
- Support anti-stigma campaigns and public education.
- Strengthen community trust through transparency and shared leadership.

COLE is strictly advisory and does not hold decision-making authority. Its recommendations guide SCOSAR leadership and community partners.

## IV. Membership Structure

### **Eligibility - Members must have direct lived experience with:**

- Substance use recovery
- Behavioral health challenges
- Justice involvement (incarceration, probation, reentry)
- Supporting family members in recovery

Members must be capable of participating respectfully in a group setting and have the desire to improve their community.

### **Composition and Terms:**

- Size: 6–12 members
- Diversity: Broad representation across age, background, and lived-experience profiles
- Term: One-year commitment with optional renewal
- Rotation: Annual turnover to broaden community voices and perspectives

### **Members agree to:**

- Attend monthly meetings
- Engage respectfully and honestly
- Maintain confidentiality
- Contribute to recommendations
- Collaborate on problem-solving

**Participation is voluntary and unpaid.**

## V. Summary of Monthly Meetings (September–November 2025)

### Thematic Insights Across All Meetings

#### **Stigma as a Central Barrier**

- Stigma affects treatment access, employment, family relationships, and personal self-worth
- Members identified significant judgment from both community and professionals
- Recovery Requires Community Infrastructure

#### **Members Repeatedly Highlighted Unmet Needs**

- Reliable transportation
- Affordable housing
- Mental health care
- Job readiness and employment pathways

#### **Overdose Response and Naloxone**

- Naloxone availability has increased, but stigma prevents some individuals from carrying or using it
- Fear of arrest or judgment can prevent people from calling 911

#### **Value of Peer Support or Lived Experience**

- Members emphasized that peers or those with lived experience offer empathy and credibility that systems often lack
- Peer-led education is more effective than institutional messaging

#### **Impact on SCOSAR Programs and Planning**

COLE's feedback is contributing to the advancement of:

- SCOSAR strategic planning (including Surry Strategic Framework 2030)
- Anti-stigma campaign
- Recovery-to-Work programming
- Naloxone distribution strategies
- Justice-involved service improvements
- Training development for community partners

COLE is already recognized as a critical input for shaping opioid settlement spending priorities.