



SOCIAL MODEL RECOVERY SYSTEMS

**2026 Inspiration of
Uncompromising Service Award
Nominations**

Inspiration of Uncompromising Service Award Nomination

Nominee #1: Deon Hunter

Nomination Description:

Deon has a remarkable ability to make every person who walks onto Omni Center feel welcome. Whether they are a resident, staff member, visitor, or community partner, he greets everyone with a genuine smile, kindness, and respect. His warmth immediately creates an environment where people feel seen and valued.

One experience that stands out involved a staff member who attended a training at Omni Center for the first time. He was unfamiliar with the facility and was having difficulty walking. Without hesitation, Deon greeted him, offered his arm for support, and personally guided him to the training location. It was a simple act, but one that reflected compassion, dignity, and genuine care for another person.

During the Juneteenth celebration, Deon took great pride in preparing food and serving the community. It was evident that he wasn't simply completing a task—he was serving others with joy and gratitude. His enthusiasm and commitment embodied the spirit of community and recovery that our organization strives to promote.

What makes Deon truly exceptional is that his service is consistent. He doesn't treat kindness as something reserved for special occasions; it is simply who he is. He is the embodiment of someone who has worked the principles of recovery and continues to live them every day. His humility, compassion, and willingness to serve inspire those around him and demonstrate the transformative power of recovery.

If there is anyone who exemplifies uncompromising service through both words and actions, it is Deon Hunter. I cannot think of anyone more deserving of this recognition.

Inspiration of Uncompromising Service Award Nomination

Nominee #2: Denise Hernandez-Felice

Nomination Description:

Denise has shown exceptional leadership, commitment, initiative, and inspiration in taking on the Senior Director, Treatment Services role at SMRS, filling large shoes following Chris Abernathy's tenure. Denise transformed parts of the SMRS organizational culture as an effective Change Leader, spearheading multiple change team projects within the treatment programs that have helped to improve access to care and decrease or remove barriers to care. She helped Directors understand how these changes and future change projects can be sustainable. Denise helps her multiple teams see ways they can work "smarter, not harder".

Denise has helped Regional Directors gain a more comprehensive understanding of budgetary expectations, teaching practical strategies for affecting real-time financial responsiveness within the SMRS regions, helping to improve SMRS's financial bottom line. Denise has normalized team-building activities as a consistent part of self/team-care, leading to reduced team burnout.

She has spearheaded plans for the ASAM 4 preparatory roll-out and has helped to move SMRS forward on multiple initiatives designed to build out data and treatment infrastructure. Denise is always willing to share best practices and ideas. We often think of her as an "idea-generator". She is a team player and gives credit where credit is due.

Denise operates with the highest ethical standards and expects the same from all employees. Denise is someone who holds herself accountable, is willing to reflect on her decisions, and whether her intentions match the outcomes. She has a positive attitude, praises in public, and counsels in private, allowing for dignity and respect at all times.

She has done all of this while balancing her family and work life and earning her LCSW licensure. I am proud to count Denise as a colleague and a friend. We are so fortunate to have her at SMRS.

Inspiration of Uncompromising Service Award Nomination

Nominee #3: Daniel Lugo

Nomination Description:

Daniel Lugo, Program Director of River Community, consistently demonstrates exceptional service through his dedication, compassion, and unwavering commitment to the residents he serves. He goes above and beyond the expectations of his role by creating an environment where residents feel valued, respected, supported, and celebrated throughout their recovery journey.

Daniel's ability to anticipate the needs of residents is evident in the personal connections he builds with each individual. He takes the time to know the residents, understand their experiences, and ensure they feel seen and heard. Whether serving lunch and dinner, engaging in conversations, or simply being present with residents, Daniel demonstrates that quality care extends beyond program requirements—it is built through genuine relationships and meaningful interactions.

Daniel is a strong advocate for residents and consistently ensures they are treated with dignity and respect. He creates a culture where residents are encouraged, recognized, and reminded that their recovery accomplishments matter. His innovative approach to engagement includes developing fun and meaningful activities for both residents and staff, strengthening community, improving morale, and creating a more positive treatment environment.

One example of Daniel's exceptional commitment is his recognition of residents who successfully complete the program. He celebrates their achievements by treating graduates to lunch and creating recovery celebrations that honor their hard work and dedication. These moments provide residents with encouragement, motivation, and a sense of accomplishment as they transition to the next phase of their recovery.

Daniel's leadership extends beyond daily operations; he continuously looks for creative ways to show residents that they are cared for and supported. His genuine compassion, attention to detail, and ability to create a welcoming and respectful atmosphere have had a significant impact on the culture of River Community.

Through his actions, Daniel exemplifies exceptional service, strong leadership, and a commitment to making a difference in the lives of others. His dedication to residents, his team, and the recovery community reflects the highest standards of service and demonstrates his commitment to helping others feel valued, respected, and celebrated.

Inspiration of Uncompromising Service Award Nomination

Nominee #4: Genesis Aguilera

Nomination Description:

Genesis came to River Covina as an intern student from Mt. SAC. Her natural empathy and drive to help others made her an ideal candidate to stay on as permanent staff. She was hired as the Administrative Assistant; however, she never took off her counselor hat.

With every person, new or existing, participant or community member walk-in, phone calls from those looking for services, and every staff member, she has shown up as her authentic caring self who is dedicated to helping improve others' quality of life. Genesis's intellect, coupled with her humanistic approach, has made every interaction she has a memorable and lasting one.

Participants seek her out and check in with her regularly. Her trauma-informed approach, cultural humility, and life experience have given her a gift to work with the population we serve. Her dedication landed her a position as a Program Manager, and working beside her has been an honor and learning experience.

There are too many single moments of excellent uncompromising service for me to mention, but I will say this. There is not one participant in our program that does not have something nice to say about their interactions with Genesis.

Inspiration of Uncompromising Service Award Nomination

Nominee #5: Ellen Striverson

Nomination Description:

We are honored to nominate Ellen Striverson, LCSW, affectionately known by many of us as “Miss E,” for the Inspiration of Uncompromising Service Award.

Ellen’s journey of service is measured not only by the years she has dedicated to Social Model Recovery Systems, but also by the life she has lived, the challenges she has overcome, and the countless lives she has touched along the way. Her service with SMRS began over 25 years ago, but her commitment to serving others started long before that.

Before becoming the compassionate leader we know today, Ellen was a veteran who proudly served our country with dedication, courage, and loyalty. That same spirit of commitment and sacrifice has continued throughout every chapter of her life.

Life presented Ellen with unimaginable challenges. At one point, she found herself experiencing homelessness and struggling to survive in one of the most difficult environments in Los Angeles, Skid Row. Many people would have been unable to overcome such circumstances, but Ellen showed the strength, resilience, and humility to recognize that asking for help is not a weakness—it is the beginning of transformation.

As it is written, “Ask and it shall be given to you; seek and you shall find; knock and the door shall be opened.” Ellen knocked on that door, and the first person who answered was Charles Porter, now Senior Director of Community Initiatives at Social Model Recovery Systems. He extended his hand, and Ellen had the courage to take it. From that moment, a new chapter began.

With determination and perseverance, Ellen rebuilt her life. She earned her master’s degree, completed her professional journey toward licensure, and became a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. Her story is a powerful reminder that a person’s past does not define their future; it is their courage, choices, and dedication that create their legacy.

Approximately seven years ago, Ellen was appointed Director of the Pasadena Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (PCADD) Full-Service Partnership Program. Since then, she has dedicated herself to serving some of the most vulnerable and underserved members of our community.

Ellen’s leadership goes far beyond a job title. She is available day and night for participants and staff. She sees people not as problems to be solved, but as human beings deserving of dignity,

compassion, and hope. She anticipates needs before they become crises, finds solutions when challenges seem impossible, and creates an environment where both participants and staff feel valued and supported.

We undersigned have experienced firsthand patience, understanding, guidance, and unwavering belief in us. Ellen has taught us that service is not simply what we do; it is who we become. The lessons, encouragement, and wisdom she shares have helped us grow not only as professionals but as individuals and better human beings.

Ellen represents the true meaning of uncompromising service. She is a veteran, a leader, a mentor, a survivor, and an inspiration. Her life is proof that one person's kindness and dedication can change countless lives.

With the deepest respect and gratitude, we proudly nominate Ellen Striverson, LCSW—our Miss E, a true legend in service and one of the most extraordinary human beings we have had the privilege to know—for the Inspiration of Uncompromising Service Award 2026.

Inspiration of Uncompromising Service Award Nomination

Nominee #6: Alexis Tapia

Nomination Description:

I would like to nominate Alexis Tapia, my wonderful co-worker. Alexis has shown me so much support since I came on board with Stepping Stones. I have watched Ms. Alexis show compassion to our residents as well as giving amazing guidance with empathy to everyone's different situations.

She has gone above and beyond to be a team player by allowing me to ask her as many questions as many times as I need to help me learn documentation. She continues to give everyone support, from our residents to other co-workers.

I am very grateful to have an amazing coworker who shows us all understanding. She is truly a great mentor to all of us. She has made residents feel welcome, as well as me, entering something new, like entering treatment or a new job, is not always easy. Ms. Alexis demonstrates caring guidance to the whole facility.

Residents express how much they respect and appreciate her in how she is an empathetic counselor to the ladies. I am grateful to have such a patient teacher.

Inspiration of Uncompromising Service Award Nomination

Nominee #7: Cecile Rodriguez

Nomination Description:

I am proud to nominate Cecile Rodriguez for the Inspiration of Uncompromising Service Award 2026.

When I think about Cecile and the work she does, I think about how many employees depend on her for guidance and support. She helps people navigate so many important parts of employment, including payroll, benefits, disability claims, sick time, vacation hours, salary adjustments, policies, and the ADP portal. These things can be confusing and stressful, especially when someone is already dealing with personal challenges, but Cecile takes the time to help people understand what they need to do.

Her job is not just about paperwork, numbers, or making sure paychecks are processed on time. She also supports employees during some of the hardest moments in their lives. Employees may contact her while dealing with a health crisis, the loss of a loved one, mental or physical health challenges, or a difficult situation at work. Cecile listens, answers questions, explains the process, and helps people navigate situations that can feel overwhelming.

She also carries the responsibility of handling sensitive matters when an employee passes away. She may have to speak with grieving family members and explain important information and obligations from the Agency. I can only imagine how difficult those conversations can be, but Cecile handles them with care, professionalism, and compassion.

Cecile seems to know almost everyone in the Agency by name. She welcomes new employees, helps them understand the Agency's systems and policies, and supports employees throughout their time with SMRS. She is often one of the first people employees turn to when they have a question or do not know where else to go.

Before Edna joined the team, Cecile also took on additional responsibilities related to recruitment, hiring, and internal employee communications. In addition to her regular workload, she created flyers for new SMRS job openings, distributed job postings throughout the Agency, and prepared hiring documents. She was also responsible for creating and sending out staff promotion announcements internally, making sure employees across SMRS were informed and that those being promoted were properly recognized and celebrated. These additional Human Resources responsibilities required time, organization, creativity, and careful attention to detail. Cecile stepped in wherever needed and ensured the work was completed.

Cecile began her career at Social Model Recovery Systems as an Administrative Assistant in the Marketing and Outreach Department. Because I also work in Community Relations, I personally

appreciate that part of her journey and understand how many different projects and responsibilities she was able to manage. She has always had an incredible ability to multitask, complete several projects at the same time, and remain focused and dependable.

What I appreciate most about Cecile is that she helps people in ways that may not always be seen by everyone. We may see emails, forms, paychecks, or answers to our questions, but we may not see all the difficult conversations, urgent requests, or problems she quietly handles behind the scenes.

Cecile's work affects every employee in the Agency. She helps people feel supported, informed, and less overwhelmed. She continues to show up for employees, even when the work is demanding and the situations are difficult.

For her dedication, compassion, reliability, and willingness to go beyond her regular responsibilities, I proudly nominate Cecile Rodriguez for the Inspiration of Uncompromising Service Award 2026.

Inspiration of Uncompromising Service Award Nomination

Nominee #8: Zelenne Cardenas

Nomination Description:

It is with great enthusiasm that I nominate Zelenne Cardenas for the Inspiration of Uncompromising Service Award. Zelenne exemplifies what it means to lead with purpose, compassion, and an unwavering commitment to serving both our staff and the communities we support.

As Chief Strategy Officer, Zelenne consistently goes beyond the expectations of her role. She has a unique ability to transform complex challenges into meaningful opportunities that strengthen our organization and improve outcomes for the individuals we serve. Her leadership is driven not by recognition, but by a genuine desire to create lasting, positive change.

What makes Zelenne exceptional is her people-first approach. She invests in employees, encourages innovation, and creates an environment where every team member feels valued, supported, and empowered to succeed. Whether she is mentoring staff, developing strategic initiatives, securing new partnerships, or advocating for resources that enhance our programs, she approaches every responsibility with integrity, professionalism, and an unwavering commitment to excellence.

Zelenne's vision has helped Social Model Recovery Systems expand its impact while remaining grounded in our mission of serving vulnerable populations with dignity and compassion. She consistently asks how we can do better—not because it is required, but because she believes every participant deserves the highest quality of care and every employee deserves the tools and support needed to make that possible.

Her influence extends far beyond strategic planning. She is approachable, collaborative, and always willing to listen. She celebrates the successes of others, offers guidance during difficult moments, and inspires those around her to think bigger, work harder, and remain focused on our mission. Her leadership fosters trust, accountability, and a culture of continuous improvement that benefits every level of the organization.

Perhaps most importantly, Zelenne leads by example. She demonstrates that uncompromising service is not simply about achieving results—it is about treating every interaction with respect, empathy, and purpose. Her dedication motivates others to exceed expectations and reminds us that meaningful change begins with leaders who genuinely care about the people they serve.

Zelenne's commitment, humility, and passion have left a lasting impact on our organization, our employees, our community partners, and the countless individuals whose lives have been positively affected through her leadership. She embodies the values this award was created to recognize and is truly deserving of the Inspiration of Uncompromising Service Award.

Inspiration of Uncompromising Service Award Nomination

Nominee #9: Samantha Latscha

Nomination Description:

I would like to nominate Samantha Latscha for her exceptional dedication, teamwork, and commitment to providing outstanding service. Samantha consistently demonstrates a willingness to help others without hesitation or complaint. She approaches every task with professionalism, compassion, and a strong sense of responsibility.

Samantha has repeatedly stepped up when support is needed, going above and beyond to assist both staff and those we serve. She is thorough in her work, dependable, and consistently looks for ways to improve outcomes. Her ability to find creative solutions and remain calm while addressing challenges has made a meaningful impact on the team and the individuals we support.

Samantha's positive attitude, strong work ethic, and commitment to excellence make her someone others can rely on. She leads by example through her actions, showing genuine care, collaboration, and dedication. Her contributions have strengthened the program and created a more supportive environment for everyone around her.

Samantha truly embodies exceptional service and deserves recognition for the lasting impact she continues to make.

Inspiration of Uncompromising Service Award Nomination

Nominee # 10: Lacey Andel

Nomination Description:

Lacey is the definition of a dedicated, dependable, and compassionate team member. As the first person you see when you walk through our doors, she sets the tone for our program with her welcoming smile, positive attitude, and genuine care for everyone she encounters. Whether she is assisting a staff member, supporting a participant, or greeting a visitor, Lacey consistently goes above and beyond to ensure each person feels valued and supported.

Recently, I had the opportunity to experience a “day in the life” of Lacey while she was enjoying a well-deserved vacation. Stepping into her role, even briefly, gave me an entirely new appreciation for the incredible amount of work, organization, and dedication she brings to our team every single day. The many responsibilities she manages behind the scenes are essential to keeping our program operating smoothly, and it quickly became clear just how difficult it is to fill the role she handles with such ease and grace.

Lacey’s commitment extends far beyond completing daily tasks—she creates a welcoming environment, supports those around her, and contributes to the overall success and positive culture of the Mid Valley Team. Her kindness, professionalism, and willingness to help others make her an invaluable part of our program.

For her unwavering dedication, exceptional work ethic, and the positive impact she has on both staff and participants, Lacey is truly deserving of recognition. She is an inspiring individual and an integral member of the Mid Valley Team, and we are incredibly grateful for everything she does each and every day.

Inspiration of Uncompromising Service Award Nomination

Nominee #11: Diane Ortiz

Nomination Description:

When I think of an individual who truly goes above and beyond, I think of Diane Ortiz. She is the embodiment of Core Belief #12: “Recovery is an individual choice and an ongoing process; it is demonstrated, measured, and strengthened by community involvement.” She shows our residents here the true meaning of community involvement to help guide them through their individual choice of recovery. Diane goes out of her way to provide exceptional connections to the community, to make sure each and every one of our residents has their needs met and ensures they are ready to face their next step outside of treatment. Not only is she a wonderful advocate for our residents with community connection, but she is also a compassionate team member always willing to assist her fellow coworker and provide support any way she can.

Nomination Description:

When I think of service, I do not think of words, but of acts, and the acts of service Diane perform for the residents here at Omni Center need no words. Be it outside health services, replacing important documents, or coordinating internal services, Diane continues to show up for the residents, day in and out, as well as inspiring her fellow staff members to do the same. There are former residents, and current residents that have measurable improvements in their lives, such as getting important medical procedures done thanks to the direct intervention of Diane. In the big ways, and in the little ways, Diane continues to impact the residents here, as well as helping staff members around her with direct training so we too in turn can further our ability to help residents reach recovery goals, as well as milestones in life. All of this, while also keeping on top of her other responsibilities which ensure the doors stay open here at Omni Center, and we continue to be able to impact on our resident's lives for the positive. It is hard to point towards any single example of Diane's impact, as every resident here could name at least one which they can point to personally. Diane's service is constant, it is every day she is here, and most importantly in my opinion, it comes from a genuine place in her heart, and that can never be imitated, learned, or dampened.

Inspiration of Uncompromising Service Award Nomination

Nominee #12: Dianne Villamin-Buchanan

Nomination Description:

I would like to nominate Dianne Villamin for the Uncompromising Service Award in recognition of her extraordinary compassion, kindness, and commitment to caring for others beyond the expectations of her role.

Dianne exemplifies what it means to provide uncompromising service. When a longtime SMRS employee left the agency, Dianne continued to check in on her and make sure she was doing well. When her calls and messages went unanswered, Dianne trusted her instincts and took action. She went to her former coworker's home and requested a welfare check, ensuring that someone would respond and provide assistance.

Because of Dianne's compassion and willingness to go above and beyond, emergency services were able to locate her former coworker, who was found in need of immediate medical attention. Her actions gave the family valuable time to travel from out of state and be present with their mother during her final moments. Although the outcome was heartbreaking, Dianne's care and persistence allowed this family the opportunity to be together and say goodbye.

What makes Dianne's actions so remarkable is that she recognized someone was struggling silently and chose not to look the other way. She demonstrates genuine concern for others, not only in moments of crisis but in her everyday interactions. Dianne consistently shows kindness, empathy, and compassion to everyone she encounters.

Dianne reminds us that service is not limited to our job responsibilities — it is about seeing people, valuing them, and taking action when they need support. Her actions represent the heart of SMRS and the true meaning of uncompromising service. I am honored to nominate Dianne for this recognition.

Inspiration of Uncompromising Service Award Nomination

Nominee #13: Jessica Reyes

Nomination Description:

Some of the most impactful employees are not always the ones in the spotlight. They are the people whose consistency, adaptability, and dedication allow entire programs to succeed. Jessica Reyes is one of those people.

Jessica works with the Skid Row Action Plan (SRAP), one of the most unique programs within our organization. Unlike many of our services, SRAP is not built around traditional case management, treatment, or prevention. Instead, our team works alongside Skid Row residents, community partners, and public agencies to strengthen systems, elevate community voices, and support resident-led solutions that improve conditions throughout the Skid Row community. The work is constantly evolving; priorities shift daily, and there is rarely a roadmap to follow. Jessica has embraced that challenge with remarkable professionalism and determination.

Working as part of a two-person team, Jessica has helped build the operational foundation that allows this work to succeed. She creates organizational systems that keep complex projects moving, maintains documentation, tracks deadlines, follows up on outstanding action items, and remembers commitments that could easily be overlooked. She consistently anticipates needs before they become problems, allowing our team to remain responsive in an environment where flexibility is essential.

What makes Jessica exceptional is not only what she accomplishes, but how she approaches every challenge. She remains calm, positive, and solution-focused regardless of changing priorities or unexpected obstacles. During her time with SMRS, she has transitioned between programs, taken on new responsibilities, adapted to evolving expectations, and continuously expanded her skills without complaint. Rather than waiting to be told what needs to be done, Jessica identifies gaps, develops solutions, and quietly ensures the work continues moving forward.

Her impact extends far beyond internal operations. Every resident council meeting, community presentation, partnership, survey, recommendation, and systems improvement effort depends on careful coordination behind the scenes. Jessica's preparation, follow-through, and attention to detail create the structure that allows our program to focus on meaningful engagement with the community. Her work strengthens relationships with partners, improves our ability to respond to community needs, and supports initiatives designed to create lasting change for the residents we serve.

Jessica also brings an unwavering sense of compassion to her work. She is the steady presence every team hopes to have. Someone who notices when support is needed, who helps others stay

organized and focused, and who approaches every interaction with patience, kindness, and respect. Her calm demeanor builds trust, fosters collaboration, and helps our team navigate even the most demanding days.

Jessica never seeks recognition for her contributions. She simply shows up every day to a challenging environment prepared to serve, solve problems, and help others succeed. She embodies uncompromising service not because of one extraordinary moment or success, but because of the extraordinary standard she brings to every single day. Our program, our partners, and the Skid Row community are stronger because of her, and I can think of no one more deserving of this recognition.

Inspiration of Uncompromising Service Award Nomination

Nominee #14: Angela Rivera

Nomination Description:

I am honored to nominate Angela Rivera for her outstanding commitment and heartfelt service to both our participants and the entire Pasadena Council on Alcoholism & Drug Dependence team. Angela consistently goes above and beyond, and her dedication never goes unnoticed. Participants often share how warmly she welcomes everyone from the moment they walk in for intake, making them feel truly valued from the start. Angela embodies grace, compassion, dedication, and gentleness in all that she does, making her an invaluable member of our organization. Thank you, Angela, for all that you do and know that you are appreciated.

Inspiration of Uncompromising Service Award Nomination

Nominee #15: Jesse Zaragoza

Nomination Description:

I would also like to nominate Jesse Zaragoza for his exceptional dedication to our participants. Jesse consistently goes above and beyond, meeting each individual exactly where they are and offering unwavering support. As a counselor, his passion for our community shines through in every interaction. Participants have expressed how valued and hopeful Jesse makes them feel, regardless of where they are on their journey. We witnessed one particular incident where a participant was experiencing a crisis. Jesse knew exactly how to de-escalate the situation by ensuring the individual felt truly heard. His empathy and commitment truly make a difference in the lives he touches.

Inspiration of Uncompromising Service Award Nomination

Nominee #16: Monique Rodriguez

Nomination Description:

I would like to nominate Monique Rodriguez for consistently going above and beyond in supporting her peers. Monique is always willing to lend a helping hand, offering encouragement, guidance, and genuine care to those around her. Monique has demonstrated remarkable growth in her role as a primary counselor. She takes initiative in her work, continually seeks opportunities to learn, and embraces new challenges with determination. Her dedication to both her colleagues and the participants she serves makes her an invaluable asset to our organization.

Inspiration of Uncompromising Service Award Nomination

Nominee #17: Cohry Osborne

Nomination Description:

I would like to nominate Cohry Osborne for his outstanding dedication and eagerness to grow in his new role. Despite being new to the team, Cohry has shown remarkable initiative, embracing every opportunity to learn and develop his skills. He approaches his work with compassion and a genuine desire to serve our participants, always striving to make a positive impact. Cohry's hard work, positive attitude, and commitment to excellence are truly appreciated. His willingness to go the extra mile and his openness to feedback demonstrate the qualities of a promising and valued team member. Thank you, Cohry, for your dedication and the compassion you bring to our organization.
