

PEER SUPPORT



At its core, peer support thrives on the belief that those who have navigated similar hurdles can unite to offer one another empathy, understanding, and the essential tools for triumph. This profound concept, prevalent in mental health, addiction recovery, and other realms of challenge, not only enriches behavioral health systems but also underscores the incredible power of human connectivity. It's a testament to our innate ability to uplift and inspire each other, fostering resilience and collective growth.¹

WHAT DOES A PEER SUPPORT WORKER DO?

A peer support worker is someone with the lived experience of recovery from a mental health condition, substance use disorder, or both. They provide non-clinical, strengths-based support and work to compliment, not replace, or duplicate the role of therapists, case managers or other members of a treatment team.² Peer support workers bring their own personal knowledge of what it is like to live and thrive with mental health conditions and substance use disorders.

GENERAL BENEFITS OF PEER SUPPORT

Research and experience show that peer support specialists have a transformative effect on both individuals and systems. Peer support has been shown to:^{3,4,5}

- Improve quality of life
- Improve engagement and satisfaction with services and support
- Improve whole health, including chronic conditions
- Decrease hospitalizations and inpatient stays
- Reduce overall cost of services
- Decrease criminal justice involvement
- Reduce return to use rates
- Decrease family isolation
- Decrease substance use

BENEFITS OF PEER SUPPORT SERVICES IN JUSTICE AND PUBLIC SAFETY SETTINGS⁶

- Reduce return to use rates
- Increase engagement in treatment
- Improve treatment attendance/treatment adherence
- Improve perceptions of social support and quality of life, and reduce feelings of guilt and shame among individuals reentering the community from corrections settings
- Reduce recidivism
- Lead to longer stays in the community for those with co-occurring serious mental illness and substance use disorders
- Reduce stigma



GENERAL BENEFITS OF PEER SUPPORT

In 2022 a national strategy was announced to address the nation's mental health crisis and part of that strategy included the development and implementation of a national certification program for mental health peer specialists. To meet this goal, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) collaborated with federal, state, tribal, territorial, and local partners—including peer specialists—to develop the National Model Standards for Peer Support Certification, inclusive of substance use, mental health, and family peer certifications. These National Model Standards closely align with the needs of the behavioral health peer workforce, and subsequently, the overarching goal of the national mental health strategy.⁷

BARRIERS TO CERTIFICATION

- Criminal Justice involvement, including but not limited to, misdemeanor or felony arrests and convictions.
- Monetary sanctions, including but not limited to, court fees, restitution, fines, civil liens.
- Long, arduous exemption process (can take in excess of 3 years) prevents individuals from working as a peer.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

- Modify background screening requirements to a fair and reasonable limitation of seven years to reduce barriers to employment while maintaining safety and trust in the profession.
- Streamline and simplify the certification process for recovery peer specialists, fostering accessibility and swift deployment of their invaluable expertise in aiding substance use and mental health recovery.
- Ensure Peer Specialists receive adequate and equitable reimbursement commensurate to a living wage for their services, recognizing their essential role in behavioral health and recovery support.



Sources:

¹Julie Serovich, PhD – Dean, College of Behavioral & Community Sciences. Peer Support & Recovery in Behavioral Health, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute Annual Report 2023. ²SAMHSA Infographic Value of Peers Infographics: General Peer Support (samhsa.gov) ³Kathleen Moore, PhD – Executive Director, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute. Peer Support & Recovery in Behavioral Health, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute Annual Report 2023. ⁴Chinman, M. J., Weingarten, R., Stayner, D., & Davidson, L. (2001). Chronicity reconsidered: improving person–environment fit through a consumer–run service. *Community mental health journal*, 37(3), 215–229. ⁵Davidson, L., Chinman, M., Kloos, B., Weingarten, R., Stayner, D., & Tebes, J. K. (1999). Peer support among individuals with severe mental illness: A review of the evidence. *Clinical psychology: Science and practice*, 6(2), 165–187. ⁶Peer-Support-Services-in-Justice-and-Public-Safety-Settings-A-Planning-and-Implementation-Toolkit-1.pdf (legislativeanalysis.org) ⁷National Model Standards for Peer Support Certification, Publication No. PEP23-10-01-001 <https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/pep23-10-01-001.pdf>

