

Leveraging the Lived Experience of Peer Support Staff in Behavioral Health

Peer support staff are individuals in recovery from a mental illness and/or substance use disorder who with training, use their lived experience to assist others in recovery. One of the key steps to successfully integrate peer support staff into behavioral health organizations is determining how to leverage peers' unique lived experience when defining their role in the organization. Effectively leveraging peer support staff's lived experiences will ensure that they add value to the organization, complement the services currently being offered, and interface with the existing staff responsibilities. This resource describes specific services that peer support staff may offer in behavioral health organizations and provides guidance on how organizations can use peer support staff to improve care delivery.

"My message to people taking this on would be to do your homework. Don't try a *plug and play*, where you hire a peer support staff and plug them into your system without doing the work. You need to really look at what the role is going to be, how you're going to support the role, how you're going to supervise the role, and how you're going to educate the rest of the staff."

- Beverly Haberle, MHS, LPC, CAADC,
Executive Director, The Council of Southeast Pennsylvania, Inc.

Types of Support Peer Support May Provide

- **Sharing personal recovery stories and acting as role models.** Peer support staff are in a position to help clients in recovery from mental illness or substance abuse disorders by offering firsthand accounts of recovery. When peer support staff effectively communicate their personal recovery stories to clients, they have the ability to instill hope and show clients – as “living proof” – that recovery is possible. Peer support staff can offer this service in a way that non-peer staff cannot because the peers have lived through the same – or a similar – condition. Through daily interactions, peer support staff can also demonstrate to clients how an individual in recovery deals with challenging situations and self-manages their condition.
- **Encouraging self-management and client engagement.** Peer support staff can encourage clients to become more involved in their own health, both implicitly as role models and explicitly through participation in the care planning process, such as helping clients develop Wellness Recovery Action Plans. Peer support staff can better understand the needs and interests of the client, having gone through similar experiences, and ensure that clients' goals are reflected in the care plan. In addition, peer support staff can build relationships with clients who are otherwise reluctant to engage in behavioral health care and increase clients' confidence and trust in the services and supports offered by the organization.
- **Advocating on behalf of the client.** Peer support staff's experience as former clients and current staff members gives them a unique perspective to speak on behalf of the client and help move the organization towards a recovery culture. This includes representing clients in staff meetings, case discussions, and other decision-making engagements, focusing attention on client interests and strengths, and challenging stereotypes by demonstrating to non-peer staff that recovery is possible. In addition, peer support staff can break down barriers between the clients' and providers' perspectives and help improve the organization's care delivery process by communicating a client's views towards a particular care strategy.

- **Connecting clients with needed services and supports.** Peer support staff are often familiar with the types of services and supports available in the community that can assist an individual in recovery from a mental illness or substance use disorder. Peer support staff can connect clients to these services and supports in the community (e.g. housing) and help remove barriers to care, such as unwelcoming program procedures or strict scheduling requirements.
- **Serving as mentor or recovery coach.** Peer mentors or recovery coaches fulfill many of the same roles described above, including engaging clients to take part in treatment, acting as role models to provide hope and encouragement, and helping clients connect with additional resources in the community. In addition, peer mentors or recovery coaches help educate and equip clients with tools or strategies to more effectively manage their conditions. For example, the peer mentor or recovery coach might help a client create and use a Wellness Recovery Action Plan to recognize early warning signs and follow personal goals to recovery.

Additional Resources

These resources provide additional guidance to help you leverage the lived experience of peer support staff and add value to your behavioral health organization:

- Missouri Department of Mental Health's [Module 3-The Importance of Role Clarity for All Parties](#) and [Module 2-Recruiting and Hiring Peer Staff](#), produced by the Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disability Services
- ViaHope's [Peer Specialist Job Description Overview and Samples](#)
- Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration's [Wellness Peer Specialist Health Coach Sample Job Description](#) and [Peer Health Coach Sample Job Description](#)
- Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration's [Supervisor Guide for Whole Health and Wellness Peer Support](#)
- US Department of Veterans Affairs - Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Centers' [Peer Specialist Toolkit](#)
- [States Medicaid that Cover Mental Health Peer Specialists \(2013\)](#)

The two videos that accompany this tip sheet, [integrating peer support staff into behavioral health](#) and [eliminating stigma faced by peer support staff](#), provide more information on integrating peer support staff into your organization.