

Key Considerations for Integrating Peer Support Staff in Behavioral Health Organizations

Peer support staff are individuals in recovery from a mental health challenge, substance use disorder, or co-occurring illnesses who – with training – use their lived experience to assist others in their journey towards wellness and recovery. The peer workforce supports client self-management to promote recovery and resiliency. Behavioral health organizations that are planning to integrate peer support staff into their workforce can take steps to ensure that the staff add value to the organization and that the responsibilities of the new peer support staff

“I’ve been in the field now for about 30 years and the thing I’ve seen that has had the most transformative effect in behavioral health – for both mental health and addiction – is hiring people in recovery to become staff and disclose their own personal recovery stories.”

- Larry Davidson, PhD, Department of Psychiatry, Yale School of Medicine

“I believe peer support works very well because it’s easy for us to relate to what they’re going through. We’ve been down that same road.”

- Gina Palilonis, Certified Recovery Specialist, Council of Southeast Pennsylvania

align with, and complement, current staff responsibilities. This tip sheet describes key steps and considerations for behavioral health organizations planning to integrate peer staff into their workforce. These key considerations are adapted from the Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services’ Five-Module Toolkit for Providers and other tools and guides listed in the “Additional Resources” section of this tip sheet.

Key Considerations

- **Commit leadership to the integration of peer staff.** Members of your organization’s leadership team should actively encourage staff buy-in to support the direction to integrate peers. It is important that leaders are available to address questions from non-peer staff that will be working with hired peers.
- **Identify a peer support champion.** Identify an effective leader who is passionate about integrating peer staff into your organization. This peer support champion should lead the effort to prepare your organization’s culture for welcoming and valuing peer support staff, which includes addressing common misperceptions among existing staff (see Module 1 of the [Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disability Services Peer Specialist Toolkit for Providers](#)¹ for more detail), and articulating peer staff’s value and benefit to clients. The peer support champion should assemble a team to facilitate organization-wide culture change and build a support base for new hires.
- **Hire more than one peer support staff member.** Hiring only one peer support staff may place additional pressure on the individual should any challenges arise. By initially hiring more than one peer support staff, you can reduce the pressure placed on one person, provide new peer support staff a source of mutual support, and improve staff retention.
- **Improve staff engagement and retention.** Peer support staff may experience emotional exhaustion caused by stress (i.e., burnout) or subtle forms of discrimination in the workplace, which can lead to poor staff retention. To help prevent this, supervisors should support peer staff in appropriate self-care measures and take action to address any discriminatory actions or speech. As with non-peer staff, creating opportunities for career

¹http://www.peerspecialist.org/PeerSpecialist1.0/Resource/Re_InformationForProviders.aspx

mobility through standardized performance measures and recognizing peer support staff for their accomplishments may also improve staff retention.

- **Recruit peer support staff who have a desire to work directly with clients.** Peer support staff are uniquely positioned to connect with behavioral health clients given their personal experiences with recovery. For this reason, you should seek out peer support staff who have a strong desire to work with clients and are able to role model their recovery. In addition, try to recruit peer support staff who are well-suited for the potentially emotionally demanding nature of the position.
- **Clearly define staff members' roles before integration.** Given the diversity of peer support staff roles, it is important to develop clear job descriptions to ensure that both the peer and non-peer staff understand the responsibilities of the new position. This helps to clarify peers' added contributions to the organization, reduce confusion among staff performing similar roles, and ensure that supervisors accurately and fairly evaluate peer and allow peers to model recovery will optimize their contributions.
- **Provide training to both peer support and non-peer support staff.** Peer and non-peer support staff alike should receive training on the organization's mission and values, as well as required skills specific to the integration of peer support staff. Training topics for peer support staff may include how to use their recovery stories to benefit the client, how to create positive relationships, and how to listen effectively. There should also be parallel training opportunities for non-peer staff. Training topics may include how peer support staff can contribute to the organization's goals, how to use person-first language, and how to identify and rectify discriminatory behaviors. Peers should also be included in the training of traditional staff. See the "Additional Resources" section below for available training options, such as the Whole Health Action Management (WHAM) training designed by the SAMHSA-HRSA Center for Integrated Health Solutions.
- **Ensure proper supervision.** Monitor the workplace environment to identify any [negative attitudes](#)² towards peer staff and address them promptly. Educate supervisors on expectations for peer staff, which will allow supervisors to provide proper guidance, support, and feedback. In addition, offer supervisors training on best practices, including administrative, educational, and supportive supervision (see Module 4 of the [Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disability Services Peer Specialist Toolkit for Providers](#)³ for more detail on different types of supervision). This will facilitate peer staff's professional development and improve their ability to serve clients. While appropriate supervision of peers is essential to successful integration of peer supports, peers should not be held to different standards than non-peer staff.

Additional Resources

These resources provide additional guidance for integrating peer support staff:

- The [Whole Health Action Management \(WHAM\)](#) training, designed by the SAMHSA-HRSA Center for Integrated Health Solutions. The ten science-based whole health and resiliency factors provide context for the role of the peer workforce in supporting and promoting whole health and wellness.
- Missouri Department of Mental Health's [Five-Module Toolkit for Providers](#), produced by the Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disability Services
- The Appalachian Consulting Group's [Catalysts for Recovery](#) training

²https://www.resourcesforintegratedcare.com/sites/default/files/Leveraging%20the%20Lived%20Experience%20of%20Peer%20Support%20Staff%20in%20Behavioral%20Health_0.pdf

³http://www.peerspecialist.org/PeerSpecialist1.0/Resource/Re_InformationForProviders.aspx

- ViaHope's [Organizational Transformation and Implementation Tools](#)
- Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services' [Peer Culture/Peer Support/Peer Leadership Transformation Tool](#)
- US Department of Veterans Affairs - Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Centers' [Peer Specialist Toolkit](#)
- Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration's [Supervisor Guide for Whole Health and Wellness Peer Support](#) and [Expert Panel Recommendations](#)
- University of North Carolina School of Social Work's [Online Training for Supervisors](#)
- Governors State University [Recovery Coach Training](#) for Peer Support Staff
- Georgia Certified Peer Specialist Project's [Certified Peer Specialist Training](#)
- Recovery Opportunity Center's [Recovery Trainings](#) for Peer Specialists, Facilitators, and Supervisors

The two videos that accompany this tip sheet, [integrating peer support staff into behavioral health](#)⁴ and [eliminating negative attitudes faced by peer support staff](#)⁵, provide more information on integrating peer support staff into your organization.

⁴https://www.resourcesforintegratedcare.com/Behavioral_Health/Peer_Supports/Video/Lived_Experience

⁵<https://www.resourcesforintegratedcare.com/peer-support/stigma>