

Implementing Effective Supervision of Peer Support Staff: Spotlight on the Council of Southeast Pennsylvania, Inc.

This spotlight highlights the Council of Southeast Pennsylvania's (the Council's) strategies for effectively supervising its peer support staff. Peer support staff are individuals in recovery from a mental health condition or substance use disorder who, with training, use their lived experience to assist others in their journey toward wellness.

This spotlight is a supplemental document to the first podcast episode, [Strategies for Effective Peer Supervision](#), in the *Integrated Care in Action* podcast series. For additional information and resources, including videos and tip sheets, on how to integrate peer support staff into your organization, visit the Resources for Integrated Care website: https://resourcesforintegratedcare.com/concepts/behavioral-health/peer_supports.

"Supervision is individualized. Even if you are supervising 10 people or 20 people, it still has to be individualized because each person is different, each of their needs are different, each of their strengths are different, and each of their challenges are different."

–Lena Marder, Clinical Supervisor for Peer Specialists at the Council

Roles of a Peer Supervisor

Peer supervisors wear several different "hats" as they manage, guide, and mentor their peer support staff. In the Council's approach, peer supervision encompasses three key types of responsibilities:

1. Administrative:

- Orient and onboard peer support staff
- Plan, align, and delegate work
- Monitor, review, and evaluate peer support staff's work
- Help peer support staff with their time management skills to enable them to make optimal use of their time, while being mindful of the volume and intensity of their case loads

2. Educational:

- Identify core competencies for peer support staff and work with staff to meet those competencies
- Help peer support staff navigate the professional system (e.g., etiquette, procedures)
- Assist peer support staff in building community relationships for client referrals
- Educate non-peer staff on the peer role

3. Supportive:

- Focus on staff strengths by leveraging existing skills and knowledge and recognizing successes
- Provide consistent, frequent opportunities to explore and problem solve peer support staff's challenges on an ongoing basis
- Prioritize time for regular communication with peer support staff members
- Advocate on behalf of peer support staff, especially if conflict arises in the workplace
- Encourage self-care and appropriate boundaries with clients

Each set of responsibilities is a critical component of peer supervision, and the Council sought to ensure that supervisors spent ample time on all areas. However, the Council found that supportive activities were often neglected, as peer supervisors spent most of their available time performing administrative and educational functions. To avoid peer support staff burnout and ensure they had the opportunity to learn best practices from their supervisor and engage in meaningful dialogues, the Council refined its peer supervision approach, as discussed below.

Transition to a Supportive, Strength-Based Peer Supervision Approach

To ensure that all peer support staff would receive the supportive supervision critical for their success, the Council hired a full-time peer supervisor to focus *solely* on supportive supervision, while site coordinators, supervisors who were already in place, were trained to begin carrying out the administrative and educational activities of peer supervision.¹

The Council also developed and refined its approach to supportive supervision for peer support staff by emphasizing a more strength-based approach. The Council defined strength-based peer supervision as a collaborative process where the supervisor provided time and opportunities for the peer staff member to identify and build upon his or her unique skills, knowledge, and characteristics. The organization felt that this approach would help peer support staff members grow professionally while also modeling the same kind of strengths-based approach that peer support staff could utilize with program participants. In addition, by focusing on strengths, the supervisors encourage peer support staff to identify their own strengths, ultimately bolstering their effectiveness in supporting participants.

Strategies for Implementing Supportive, Strength-Based Supervision of Peer Support Staff

The table below illustrates the strategies that the Council implemented as part of this approach.

Supervision Strategy	Example
Routinely provide support in a structured setting, focused on the strengths of peer support staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tailor language to include supportive words and phrasing. For example, supervisors always consider the tone and content of notes and reminders that they leave for the peer support staff to ensure the reminders do not come across as punitive.
Use peer support supervision sessions to model the skills peer staff need to work successfully with clients.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with the peer support staff member to develop individualized goals, tied to identified strengths. • Support the peer support staff in using effective, person-centered approaches to develop and enact individualized recovery plans with participants.

¹ This spotlight specifically describes the Council’s approach to peer supervision, which is focused on hiring a full-time peer supervisor to focus *solely* on supportive supervision. Organizations and agencies reading this spotlight may not have the resources or capacity to hire a full-time peer supervisor to focus exclusively on supportive supervision. However, these organizations may still benefit from focusing on a strength-based approach to supervision. In addition, these organizations may want to consider offering individual and group supervision to help identify and address organizational culture issues (e.g., microaggressions) in a shared and supportive environment.

Build confidence by using supervisory sessions to discuss and role play strategies for dealing with challenging situations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review past situations and potential situations peer support staff members may experience. Discuss resources and strengths the peer staff member can draw from to address these situations. • Consider role playing potentially challenging conversations the peer staff member may experience with clients.
Use supervisory sessions to maintain trust and detect issues early.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide space in each supervisory session to listen to any needs or concerns the peer support staff member wants to raise. • Ask explicitly about workload to assess feasibility. • Provide opportunities to discuss self-care.

Resources to Support Effective Peer Supervision

These resources provide guidance for behavioral health organizations as they develop and refine their peer supervision approach.

- The Pillars of Peer Support’s [summary of the Peer Specialist Supervision Summit](#)
- SAMHSA-HRSA Center for Integrated Health Solutions’ [webinar slides on hiring and supervising peer providers to support integrated care](#)
- Magellan Health Services’ course on [effective supervision of peer specialists](#)
- Georgia Mental Health Consumer Network’s [Supervisor Guide: Peer Support Whole Health and Wellness Coach](#)

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