Addressing Stigma in Peer Recovery Support Services

December 2024

Introduction

This brief provides an overview of the key points discussed during the workshop on "Addressing Stigma in Peer Recovery Support Services," held at the RISE 2024 Conference in Anaheim, California, on May 24, 2024. The session was hosted by the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) Access and Recovery Training and Technical Assistance Center through Altarum and was presented by Tyrina Taylor, MPH; Diana Williams, LCSW; and Joseph Sanchez. The session focused on identifying and addressing stigma within the implementation of peer recovery support services (PRSS).

Defining Stigma

Stigma is a set of negative and often unfair beliefs that a society or group holds about something. This session highlighted various types of stigma.

Perceived Stigma	The belief that others have negative perceptions about people with mental illness
Self-Stigma	Internalization of public stigma by individuals with mental illness or substance use disorders (SUDs)
Public Stigma	Endorsement of negative stereotypes and biases by the public, leading to discrimination
Structural Stigma	Institutional policies or societal structures that decrease opportunities for people with mental illness
Health Practitioner Stigma	When health professionals allow stereotypes and biases to affect patient care negatively

Learning Objectives

By the end of this session, participants were expected to:

1. **Identify common policies and procedures that perpetuate stigma** within organizations and explore ways to adapt them toward a recovery-oriented framework.

2. **Describe the impact of stigma** on the peer workforce in their communities.

3. **Identify strategies to combat stigma** within their organizations and communities.

Common Themes From Workshop Discussions

During the workshop, participants engaged in group discussions around key themes related to stigma in PRSS. The following were the overarching themes and barriers identified.

1. Hiring Practices

Barriers	Solutions
Criminal records and gaps in work history	Limit record look-back periods (e.g., more than 5 years).
Structural stigma related to felony records and licensing challenges	Make licensing more affordable by considering the applicant's experience.
	Form committees or coalitions to advocate for fair hiring practices.
	Anonymize applicant data to reduce bias.

2. Workforce/Peer Development Barriers

Barriers	Solutions
Insufficient training and lack of education for peer support workers	Develop tailored training and supervision programs.
Micromanagement and inconsistent self-care practices	Educate about best practices and provide sensitivity training.
Challenges related to criminal background checks and job retention	Create opportunities for continuing education and career advancement.

3. Community Involvement

Barriers	Solutions
Lack of participation from government officials	Host public education events and provide accessible data and analytics.
Transportation issues for those in need of services	Collaborate with transportation providers to improve access.
Limited access to housing and resources	Explore grants for subsidized housing solutions.

4. Retention

Barriers	Solutions
Policies surrounding criminal records and lived experiences	Implement pathways for professional development, including peer support after relapse.
Lack of support, funding, and clear career paths	Ensure equal pay and access to better training.
	Provide more information about the roles and responsibilities to the public.

Conclusion

The workshop emphasized the importance of addressing stigma within PRSS to create a more inclusive, supportive, and recovery-oriented environment. By adopting the identified strategies and solutions, organizations can work toward reducing stigma and improving outcomes for individuals with mental health disorders and SUDs.

The U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs (OJP) and BJA have supported work to find solutions to address stigma within the implementation of PRSS. This workshop was one tool to gain more information. OJP and BJA have released the following podcasts as well as publications continuing the discussion.

- Addressing Stigma in Peer Recovery Support Services Programming, Episode 1
- Addressing Stigma in Peer Recovery Support Services Programming, Episode 2
- Addressing Stigma in Peer Recovery Support Services Programming, Episode 3
- Addressing Stigma in Peer Recovery Support Services Programming, Episode 4

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