

Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA)

Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program (COSSUP)

Recruiting, Hiring, and Onboarding Peer Specialists

Overview

Peer specialists provide valuable support and services to individuals with substance use disorders (SUDs) across a range of organizations. As a peer recovery support services (PRSS) program coordinator, you may face challenges related to recruiting, hiring, and onboarding peer specialists. This technical assistance (TA) package provides information, resources, and tools to effectively recruit, integrate, and support newly hired peer specialists into PRSS teams.

Introduction

Peer specialists provide support to individuals with SUDs in a wide range of criminal justice, behavioral health, health care, social services, and community-based organizations. Peer specialists' lived experience with recovery from SUDs and criminal justice involvement, and their unique competencies, are focused around four primary types of support: (1) emotional, (2) informational, (3) instrumental, and (4) affiliational (*Salzer, 2002; SAMHSA, 2017*).

When you are developing a new PRSS program, it is important that leadership and staff members are committed to the success of the program and that staff members are informed of the expectations of new PRSS programs or positions. Before you recruit and hire, there are five key actions that you can encourage your organization to take to prepare:



1. **Promote a recovery orientation** among community partners and stakeholders.
2. **Prepare to integrate** peer support into the organizational culture.
3. **Plan an appropriate menu of peer supports** for context, with fidelity to the selected model(s).
4. **Produce policies, procedures, and protocols** that are consistent with and supportive of peer practice, and processes that address barriers to peer support.
5. **Provide appropriate supervision** that is patterned on the best practices of PRSS and of working with criminal justice populations.

To learn more about organizational readiness, peer specialist roles, responsibilities, and core competencies in criminal justice settings, see TA packages in this series: [Five Steps to Effective Integration of Peer Recovery Support Services in the Criminal Justice System](#).

When your program is ready to proceed, effective recruitment, hiring, and onboarding are essential to creating a good fit between a new employee and your organization and will in turn increase job satisfaction, reduce staff turnover, and improve program performance (*Pike, 2014*). This TA package discusses (1) best practices for recruiting and hiring peer specialists, (2) strategies to successfully onboard newly hired staff members, and (3) legal and policy considerations related to interviewing and onboarding candidates. Tools and resources include sample job descriptions, potential interview questions, ideas for training courses to offer during orientation and onboarding, and links to other relevant resources and tools.

Considerations for Recruiting and Hiring

Unlike other types of programs, PRSS programs value candidates who have lived experiences that relate to the individuals who are being served, including personal experience with SUD, co-occurring mental health disorders, and criminal justice system involvement. Because these lived experiences are at the core of peer work, it is important that organizations identify appropriate candidates *and* do so in a manner that is legal, respectful, and does not stigmatize or retraumatize people. The following considerations are helpful to successfully navigate the recruitment and hiring of peer specialists.

Reviewing Federal and State Laws

As with any job position, it is important to abide by federal and state laws—including the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)—governing employer practices related to discrimination, rights of individuals with disabilities, and workers' rights when hiring for a PRSS position. While an individual's lived experiences with SUDs are a major component of a peer practitioner's background, it is important to carefully navigate the ways in which job qualifications and recruitment announcements are written and applicants' experiences are questioned and discussed. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) provides a list of prohibited employment policies and practices. These policies and practices should be reviewed by program coordinators and human resources staff. In addition, employment laws vary by state; therefore, it is important to be aware of specific state laws that impact hiring and employment practices. The following are some things to keep in mind.

Determining Certification Requirements

One key decision that program coordinators must make is whether to hire peer specialists who have already obtained their certification or require that they obtain certification within a specific time frame upon being hired. While some states do not require certification for peer specialists, certified peer specialists will come to the job with a level of basic training that can be supplemented with specific program-based training, whereas peer specialists who have not yet obtained certification may require additional basic PRSS training. To help determine whether your organization should require certification prior to or after hiring, and to make other decisions related to certification, program coordinators should explore the following considerations:

- What is your state's credentialing/certifying entity?
- What are the requirements for certification (e.g., number of hours, in-person or virtual attendance, costs, type of exam)?
- If there is an exam, which certification entity administers it (e.g., International Certification & Reciprocity Consortium [IR&RC] or National Association for Addiction Professionals)?
- Are there ongoing training requirements post-certification?
- Is certification linked to Medicaid and/or other financial reimbursement?
- Can peer specialists work while they are meeting their certification requirements?
- Are there specific supervision requirements in your state for certified peer specialists?

The [State-by-State Directory of Peer Recovery Coaching Training and Certification Programs \(facesandvoicesofrecovery.org\)](https://facesandvoicesofrecovery.org) will assist you in locating information on the credentialing process in your state.

Establishing a Supervision Plan

Prior to recruiting and hiring peer specialists, it is important that program coordinators consider the supervision structure that will be in place as peer specialists are brought into the organization. As mentioned above, some state certifications have supervision requirements, including a supervisor certification that is required for the provision of supervision to peer specialists. It is important to become familiar with the requirements in your state. In addition, planning for the supervision structure will involve determining the individual or individuals who will be responsible for supervising the peer specialists. This may mean providing existing staff training and guidance prior to onboarding peer specialists. Other options may also include partnering with an outside agency to provide supervision and guidance on supervising peer specialists in your state. As you consider your supervision structure, it is important to ensure that you are planning for all three types of supervision: administrative, educative, and supportive. These will be discussed in more detail later. In addition, more information about supervision of peer specialists can be found in [*Supporting and Managing Peer Specialists: Supervision of Peer Recovery Support Services*](#).

Writing the Job Description

A job description provides a summary of the primary duties, responsibilities, and qualifications of a position. It is important to reflect organizational priorities and expectations. Components of a job description should include:

- A general description of the position that summarizes the peer specialist's core roles and functions
- The main function of the position
- The qualifications and competencies required for the position, including:
 - Educational requirements
 - Training or certification requirements
 - Lived experience
 - Eligibility requirements (e.g., length of time in recovery)
- The core responsibilities and duties of the position
- The employment conditions, including:
 - Physical requirements (e.g., standing or lifting objectives)
 - Environmental conditions (e.g., office-based, in the field, in multiple locations, virtual, hybrid)
 - Other requirements (e.g., driver's license, background check)
- A description of organizational benefits, including:
 - Salary range
 - Health, dental, and vision insurance
 - Disability insurance
 - Time off
 - Retirement benefits
 - Other (e.g., tuition/cell phone/mileage reimbursement, health and wellness incentives)

For peer-specific roles, it may also be helpful to include Medicaid reimbursement information. Sample job descriptions are included in Appendix A.

Please note, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) convened national workgroups to develop a set of Core Competencies for Peer Specialists in Behavioral Health Services. These competencies, and others identified by the IC&RC and the National Association of Peer Supporters (N.A.P.S.), serve as resources by which program administrators can identify the core tasks of peer specialists and the types of supports they will provide. They can also

serve as a basis to determine the competencies your peer specialists will need for the specific roles they will have in your program setting and for writing their job descriptions.

Recruiting and Screening Candidates

When recruiting for PRSS positions, you *can* recruit for specific lived experiences and still stay within the bounds of the ADA. You should be specific about the *type* of lived experiences you are seeking in a candidate. For example, “personal history of having a substance use disorder” (Legere, 2015) is acceptable. Examples of recruitment advertisements include:

Certified Peer Specialist	Recovery Coach	Peer Specialist
<p>Twenty hours per week. Offer peer-to-peer support and advocacy to individuals receiving services, facilitate support groups, and participate in organizational planning committees. Requirements include personal experience related to substance use disorder treatment and willingness to share personal experience to educate and inspire others. Must be a Certified Peer Specialist or willing to be trained and take certification exam within first six months. Past peer support and group facilitation experience preferred (Legere, 2015).</p>	<p>Engages with participants in the addiction treatment program and encourages them to maintain recovery, participate in recovery-oriented activities, and develop a network of recovery supports. Leads peer-facilitated groups and models effective group participation and recovery-oriented perspective for individuals with substance use disorders. Helps participants identify and access needed resources and recovery supports (Dartmouth-Hitchcock, n.d.).</p>	<p>As an active, engaged member of the team, the peer specialist provides hope, encouragement, and recovery support services to a diverse population of program participants who have a range of behavioral health conditions and are at various stages of recovery. Drawing significantly on personal experience with and knowledge of local behavioral health services and other recovery resources, the peer specialist helps to link individuals receiving services to community resources as directed by that individual’s own recovery journey. The peer specialist works closely with program intake staff, clinicians, social workers, and outreach staff. Peer support staff report directly to the peer specialist supervisor (Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disability Services [DBHIDS], 2017).</p>

Where to Recruit Potential Candidates

Many organizations have a standard online process for posting open positions. However, PRSS positions are specialized and recruiting for peer specialists may require you to think about posting PRSS positions in more targeted locations. There are numerous places to recruit peer specialist candidates, often at little or no cost, including:

- National organizations that post positions within behavioral health, criminal justice, health care, and recovery community organizations, which help to reach a more specific group of potential applicants who could already have experience in relevant fields.
- The N.A.P.S. [job board](#).
- Statewide recovery community organizations that directly support peer specialists, such as [Friends of Recovery New York](#) and [Missouri Coalition of Recovery Support Providers](#).

- State and local peer specialist credentialing organizations, such as the [Maryland Addiction and Behavioral-health Professionals Certification Board](#) and the [Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Providers of New York State](#).
- Local and state career centers that regularly publicize available employment opportunities through websites and in-person employment support services.
- Local Oxford Houses or recovery houses, collegiate recovery programs, and treatment alumni groups, which often have job boards.
- Church newsletters and bulletin boards.
- Social media platforms, including Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram, that reach broad audiences.
- Alcoholics Anonymous/Narcotics Anonymous meetings.

Interviewing Candidates

As with recruitment efforts, and during each stage of the hiring and employment process, employers must be cognizant of and abide by state and federal employment and anti-discrimination laws. During the interview process, employers **cannot** question candidates about their specific diagnoses or treatment. Employers are prohibited from making pre-employment inquiries about disabilities, SUD, and mental health history. Only if candidates first disclose their SUD recovery status can you then ask how long they have been in recovery. The following are examples of interview questions that are **against** the law to ask during an interview (*adapted from Philadelphia DBHIDS, 2017*):

- Do you have a history of drug or alcohol use disorder?
- Were you treated for a substance use disorder?
- Do you smoke, drink, or use drugs?
- Do you have any physical or mental disabilities that would keep you from performing the job?
- What medications are you currently taking?
- How many days were you out of work sick last year?
- When was the last time you were in a hospital or residential program?

Employers can, however, ask questions about how individuals might apply their lived experience to meet the required job duties and functions.

When interviewing candidates for PRSS positions, you should develop an interview committee that represents the diversity of roles in your organization. Consider including individuals who receive services from the organization in the recruitment and interviewing process, as their unique perspectives are incredibly valuable when assessing how well a candidate will meet the needs of participants.

It is important that you use language that is trauma-informed during the interview, in job descriptions, and in recruitment materials. Interviewers should never ask candidates to describe past traumatic experiences. If this is a candidate's first potential job as a peer specialist, chances are they have summoned a great deal of courage to show up to the interview. Interviews are challenging for everyone, especially for someone who has not been in the workforce—recently or ever—and who may lack confidence in their skills, aptitudes, and ability to fit into an unfamiliar environment. Be welcoming and accommodating, letting them know how glad you are that they are interested in the job and that you have been looking forward to the interview. Also, remind them that the interview process is about finding a good match for both the program and the candidate; encourage them to ask questions that will help them determine whether your organization is the kind of place in which they would like to work. It is also important to remind your team and your human resources representatives that this is a specialized position and that peer specialists may not have college degrees, may not arrive to the interview in business attire (may be over- or under-dressed), and may not know traditional interviewing processes. This does not mean that they will not be a good peer specialist or fit well within your team and organization. You are recruiting and hiring them for their lived experience and their expertise in that field. Being respectful and open to their differences will be key when interviewing candidates.

Addressing Criminal Histories

Many job candidates will have had past criminal involvement with the legal system. Being able to leverage that experience as a resource of expertise and identification can be critical to building trust in peer relationships. Therefore, it is important for organizations to recognize that a range of lived experiences, including past criminal legal system involvement, is a valuable asset among peer specialists and to reframe this type of lived experience as a peer specialist competency.

In addition, individuals with past criminal histories face tremendous challenges obtaining employment, which is itself a barrier to recovery. While some organizations may prohibit the hiring of individuals with criminal histories due to unique public safety considerations, most organizations are encouraged to conduct individualized comprehensive reviews of candidates rather than disqualify potential applicants based on past criminal legal system involvement alone.

A good starting point is to provide time and space to submit evidence and documentation of mitigation and rehabilitation. Consider: what was the nature of the crime(s) committed and how much time has passed since the offense? Next, consider the individual's criminal history in relation to how it directly corresponds to assigned job duties and responsibilities. Under optimal circumstances, you can avoid the matter altogether by simply not asking about criminal history on the application. As for background checks, include them only if they are mandated by law or organizational policy and state this plainly and clearly on the application (*Delman and Klonick, n.d.*). In addition, work with your human resources department to identify what, if any, policy changes may need to be made prior to the offer of employment.

It is important that employers understand state and federal employment regulations relating to criminal history backgrounds. The EEOC provides information about the legality of [considering arrest and conviction records in employment decisions](#); however, state laws vary.

Potential Interview Questions

Because interviewing is an important way to understand whether a candidate would be a good fit in an organization, it is important to ask interview questions that help employers understand a potential peer worker's experience, communication style, interpersonal skills, technical skills, and other factors that could affect a person's success in a particular job. As discussed, employers cannot ask candidates about their diagnoses or disabilities; however, employers can ask candidates about how they can apply their lived experiences in the job role. Example interview questions include:

- How would you define the peer role and its key tasks or activities?
- What value does your lived experience bring to this program?
- This job requires a willingness to share some parts of your personal story when it makes sense to do so. How comfortable are you doing this?
- In what situations would you not feel comfortable sharing your lived experience?
- What are some ways that you might use your lived experience to support the people with whom you would be working?
- What aspects of your own journey will best be able to inspire and give hope to those you serve?
- When could you see sharing your story as a part of your work here?
- What does recovery mean to you?
- How do you develop trust and a relationship with the people you are supporting?
- How do you deal with differences? How comfortable are you working with people who do not share your race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation?
- How would you support a person who is convinced that their life is never going to get better?
- In a work environment that has many different jobs and roles, how do you "stay in your own lane"?
- Can you tell me about a time you experienced a conflict with a coworker? How did you handle it?
- What would you do if you felt your job was jeopardizing your recovery?
- Can you tell me about your history of dependability in prior positions or in other activities in your life?
- What wellness tools have you found helpful in sustaining your recovery?
- How do you handle (positive and negative) feedback when it concerns your job performance?

Adapted from Legere, 2015; Philadelphia DBHIDS, 2017

Onboarding New Hires

Onboarding includes proactive formal and informal practices that help new staff members adapt to their new work environment and job responsibilities to (1) reduce newcomer uncertainty and anxiety and (2) facilitate the development of social capital and relationships (Klein and Polin, 2012). Onboarding occurs over a specific time frame, starting when a new employee begins employment and generally lasting for a few weeks to a few months, depending on the organization and the employee's needs. Examples of onboarding activities include orientation, shadowing, training, and initial supervision, among others. It can be useful to create and provide new peer specialists an onboarding package containing key information and resources, including links to payroll and benefit information, an employee handbook, and a staff directory. The onboarding resource package should also provide helpful tips to guide new workers through the first 60 to 90 days of their job. To aid in this process, we have included a checklist for the first 90 days in Appendix B. In addition, you can direct newly hired peer specialists to “Support for [Newly Hired Peers](#).”

The onboarding process has three components: (1) inform—ensuring you provide the information, resources, and training necessary for newcomers to successfully perform their job, (2) welcome—providing and facilitating social support and an environment that fosters positive work relationships, and (3) guide—providing formal and informal supervision, mentorship, and ongoing support (Burgess, 2016; Klein and Houser, 2018).

Inform: Orientation and Training

Once a peer specialist is hired, it is important to provide them with adequate and effective training that will orient them to the organization, set parameters and expectations for their specific role, and develop skills and knowledge for specific job-related responsibilities. Special consideration should be given to peer specialists who are entering the workforce for the first time or may be unfamiliar with working in a service-oriented environment. Trainings and other workplace education should develop peer specialists' “soft” and “hard” skills.

Recommended training topics for peer specialists and other staff members include:

- Strategic storytelling/sharing
- Healthy boundaries
- Person-centered planning and documentation
- Building resilience through stress management, self-care, and wellness planning
- Motivational interviewing and active listening
- Communication and leadership styles
- Trauma-informed care

(Delman and Klodnick, n.d.; Philadelphia DBHIDS, 2017; Connecticut Center for Recovery Training, 2020; Georgia Council on Substance Abuse, 2020).

In addition, Table 1 provides specialized training topics in alignment with specific types of peer roles within the criminal justice system and their related key competencies.

Table 1. Specialized Topics

<i>Core Responsibilities</i>	<i>Key Competencies</i>	<i>On-the-job Training (Beyond Certification)</i>
<i>Peer Recovery Coach With Diversion/Quick Response Team</i>		
<p><i>Serve as guide and mentor to a person seeking or already in recovery. Help identify and remove obstacles and barriers. Support connections to a recovery community and other resources useful for building recovery capital. Respect the path to recovery chosen by a person seeking support.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engages peers in collaborative and caring relationships • Provides personalized support: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Practices a strengths-based approach to recovery/wellness ○ Tailors services and supports to meet preferences and unique needs ○ Provides concrete assistance to help accomplish goals and tasks ○ Assists individual in identifying support systems ○ Applies the principles of individual choice and self-determination ○ Assists individual to identify and build on their strengths and resiliencies • Supports holistic, ongoing recovery planning • Provides information about skills related to health, wellness, and recovery • Promotes leadership, advocacy, growth, and development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing skill development in recovery supports • Interpersonal skill training, choice in self-determination • Shared decision-making strategies • Whole Health Action Management (WHAM) for holistic wellness • Crisis management • Time management and prioritization of tasks • How to involve family and friends in the individual’s recovery program
<i>Peer Recovery Specialist—Treatment and Recovery Courts</i>		
<p><i>Supporting people involved with the criminal justice system as mentor, guide, and/or resource connector while they are engaged with the court, and beyond.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports personalized recovery planning and positive engagement in criminal justice system <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Assists and supports participants in setting goals related to adherence to court requirements ○ Proposes strategies to help participants accomplish tasks or goals • Links to resources, services, and supports <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Addresses barriers to housing, employment ○ Assists with identifying, selecting, and using resources and services • Provides information about skills related to health, wellness, and recovery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Court processes • Developing and identifying resources to refer • Ongoing recovery training opportunities • Trauma and violence

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocates for individuals while supporting compliance • Supports collaboration and teamwork 	
Peer Navigator—Reentry		
<p><i>Assertive advocacy on recovery-related issues that transcend personal, professional, and institutional interests: reduce/eliminate service disparities; reduce/eliminate stigma/discrimination; and make addiction treatment more responsive, effective, and efficient</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports personalized recovery planning focused on positive engagement with the criminal justice system • Advocates for individuals while supporting compliance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Addresses relationship between incarceration and trauma ○ Addresses stigma, discrimination, and exploitation that individuals face within society as a result of their criminal justice involvement • Links to resources, services, and supports <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Addresses barriers to housing, employment ○ Assists with identifying, selecting, and using resources and services • Helps participants manage crises • Supports collaboration and teamwork 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to resources, such as the National Reentry Services Center (NRRC) • Crisis management • Trauma-informed care • Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) training

(Delman and Klodnick, n.d.; Philadelphia DBHIDS, 2017; Connecticut Center for Recovery Training, 2020; Georgia Council on Substance Abuse, 2020)

Welcome: Integration Into New Teams

Because peer specialists will most likely work collaboratively as part of a larger team and/or across different parts of a program, organization, or collaborative, it is important that newcomers feel welcomed, socially accepted, and supported. Strategies you can use to successfully integrate new peer specialists into teams include:

- Welcoming new peer specialists through organization-wide communications and at staff meetings.
- Providing an organizational tour to newly hired peer specialists.
- Scheduling “meet-and-greets” between newly hired staff members, coworkers, and partners.
- Having new peer specialists shadow coworkers to better understand the different roles and responsibilities across the team.
- Providing training and education to all staff on the roles and responsibilities of peer specialists and the value they bring to the organization.

In some organizations, there may only be one or two peer specialists on staff. Being a solitary peer voice can feel isolating and disempowering, which can be detrimental to PRSS work and job satisfaction. To balance this, supervisors should work with peer specialists to set up a support system outside of the organization. The organization should cover any additional costs in support of staff development. Ideas for helping solitary peers connect outside of their organization include:

- Find out if there is a statewide peer advocacy organization that can connect peer specialists with resources and possible support in your area.
- If there is a recovery community organization in your area, inquire about connecting with members for support and resources.
- Connect with other peer specialists in your area who are working with other organizations.
- Join or start a peer-to-peer supervision group that meets regularly, in which members offer support, guidance, and resources to each other.
- Encourage peer specialists to continue their own recovery program and actively seek support and assistance from mentors and fellow members of mutual aid programs.

What Peer Specialists Do and Do Not Do

An important aspect of successfully integrating new peer specialists into existing teams is to clearly establish the roles and responsibilities of peer specialists with existing non-peer and peer staff members. Table 2 provides a quick guide on what peer roles typically do and do not involve.

Table 2. What Peer Specialist Roles Do and Do Not Do

Peer Specialists Do	Peer Specialists Do Not
Share lived experience	Give advice or directives
Motivate through hope and inspiration	Motivate through fear or shame
Support many pathways to recovery	Support only one pathway to recovery
Guide others in accomplishing daily tasks	Do tasks for others
Use language based on common experiences	Use clinical language or language specific to only one recovery pathway
Teach others how to acquire needed resources, including money	Give resources and money to others
Help others find professional services from lawyers, doctors, psychologists, and financial advisors, among others	Provide professional services
Share knowledge of local resources	Provide case management services
Encourage, support, and praise	Diagnose, assess, and treat
Help others set personal goals	Mandate tasks and behaviors
Role-model positive recovery behaviors	Tell others how to lead their lives in recovery

(Adapted from Wisconsin Peer Specialist Employment Initiative, 2017)

More information about common peer roles and responsibilities can be found in [Five Steps to Effective Integration of Peer Recovery Support Services in the Criminal Justice System](#).

Introduction: Supervision of Peer Work

Peer specialists should receive direction from their supervisor, teammates, and other coworkers to get oriented to the organization and their new role, overcome challenges, and grow professionally. Effective supervision comes in different structures and types and from different people.

Remember, there are three types of supervision that should be provided: (1) administrative, (2) educative, and (3) supportive. Administrative supervision provides support related to work coordination, communication, and administration. Educative supervision leads to increased knowledge and skill development. Supportive supervision provides guidance related to developing interpersonal skills and strengthening self-awareness. Table 3 offers examples of activities for each of the three types of supervision that peer specialists should receive.

Table 3. Supervision Framework

Administrative	Educative	Supportive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Orienting and placing staff members • Planning, assigning, and delegating work • Monitoring, reviewing, and evaluating work • Coordinating work • Sharing information • Explaining administrative functions • Liaising with the community • Assisting with time management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessing strengths and growth opportunities • Identifying the knowledge and skills necessary to do the work • Providing teaching, training, and learning resources, including professional and leadership development • Using learning opportunities that arise when reviewing individuals who are receiving support • Educating other staff on the role of peer support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocating • Reassuring • Encouraging • Recognizing efforts • Providing opportunities to “vent” • Giving perspective • Encouraging self-care • Creating opportunities for connecting with other peer staff members

(Adapted from Philadelphia DBHIDS, 2017; SAMHSA, n.d.)

In addition, supervision is more effective when it is delivered in different ways. While supervision may often occur one-on-one between a supervisor and a peer specialist, other types of supervision are also useful. These include (1) group supervision, where employees can offer each other information, resources, and support, (2) peer supervision, in which experienced peer specialists offer education and supportive supervision to new peer workers, and (3) co-supervision, in which peer staff work collectively to provide supervision as a team (*Philadelphia DBHIDS, 2017*).

For a peer specialist entering the organization—and possibly the field for the first time—the first few sessions of supervision will set the tone for their experience. While a certain formality is

required, it is important to set a stage that invites inquiry, introspection, and a willingness to develop continual improvement in practice. Another important aspect of successful integration of peer specialists is to address accountability and expectations between the organization, the supervisor, and the peer specialists. One way of doing this is through a contractual agreement that binds the supervisory relationship, covering who is responsible for what, detailing meeting logistics, and establishing time frames and milestones (DBHIS, 2017). More information about effective supervision can be found in [Supporting and Managing Peer Specialists: Supervision of Peer Recovery Support Services](#).

Case Example: Oaks Integrated Care

Oaks Integrated Care, a certified community behavioral health clinic, offers an array of treatment, services, and supports to individuals with SUD and mental health challenges across central and southern New Jersey. Oaks Integrated Care partners with the Burlington County Prosecutor's Office, local law enforcement agencies, and correctional agencies to provide peer recovery support, other recovery services, and treatment to individuals who are at risk of criminal justice involvement or who are currently incarcerated. In partnership with local police departments, Oaks Integrated Care offers treatment alternatives, community support, and recovery support to individuals at risk of incarceration through its Straight to Treatment program. Oaks Integrated Care recovery specialists are peer specialists who help individuals with SUDs develop and implement recovery plans and support Straight to Treatment program participants in the community. In addition to the Straight to Treatment program, Oaks Integrated Care recovery specialists provide peer support and services to individuals currently incarcerated in partnership with local county jails through the Early Intervention Support Services for Incarcerated Men. This program works closely with two community-based case management programs designed to serve individuals with opioid use disorder, the Support Teams for Addiction Recovery program, and the Safe at Home program.

To successfully onboard and integrate peer specialists into the organization, Kacey Batushansky, Program Director of Mental Health and Addiction Services at Oaks Integrated Care, focuses on four important components: (1) the interview process, (2) orientation and training, (3) ongoing supervision, and (4) integrating peer specialists into existing teams.

Interview Process

One of the most important factors for understanding whether a candidate is a good fit at an organization is determining whether the candidate shares the same values held by the organization. For Oaks Integrated Care, this means that some of the interview questions posed to candidates ask them to discuss their views on different types of pathways to recovery. The organization embraces multiple pathways and expects peer specialists to offer support and services that honor individuals' agency and autonomy about their recovery. These values are also detailed in the example job description (see example job descriptions in Appendix A).

In addition to shared values, during the interview process, candidates are asked how they will apply their lived experience to help others. In compliance with federal law, candidates are never asked to disclose their histories or diagnoses but, rather, are asked about how their experience can help them relate to individuals.

Orientation and Training

During the first few weeks of employment at the organization, new peer recovery specialists participate in a series of trainings, including those for all new staff members and those specific to the peer recovery specialist role. If newly hired peer recovery specialists have not completed a certified recovery coaching program, the organization will provide that training for them through a partnership with the New Jersey Prevention Network. Some of the trainings provided to newly hired peer recovery specialists include:

- **Crisis prevention intervention.** This training helps staff members apply verbal de-escalation skills and prevent potential crisis situations from developing.
- **Trauma-informed care and trauma-informed addiction practices.** These trainings help staff members understand the underlying impacts of trauma and how to deliver services and supports in a manner that is less likely to retraumatize individuals.
- **Electronic health record (EHR) system training.** It is common for recovery specialists to have little or no experience with EHRs prior to their first peer specialist position. This training helps recovery specialists become comfortable with using EHR systems.
- **Motivational interviewing with a specific focus on stages of change.** This training helps recovery specialists and other staff members understand individuals' readiness for change and techniques to help individuals change behaviors.
- **Healthy disclosure.** This training helps recovery specialists establish professional boundaries while using their lived experience to relate to and support individuals.

Ongoing Supervision

Oaks Integrated Care supervisors provide ongoing support to peer recovery specialists through individual and group supervision. One-on-one supervision takes place between peer recovery specialists and their supervisors at least weekly. Group supervision meetings, which occur twice per month, are peer-based and offer an opportunity for team members to support one another. In addition to individual and group supervision, case consultation occurs weekly, in which the care team discusses screening concerns, linkages and referrals, progress with follow-up, risk management, and peers' positive or negative reactions.

To facilitate effective supervision, recovery specialists’ supervisors use a supervision log that contains a checklist of topics that are discussed at least once per month; however, most of these topics are addressed more frequently during weekly one-on-one supervision and group supervision meetings. Examples of supervision topics include:

Flexibility	Professional boundaries	Confidentiality
Attitude	Ethical issues	Trauma-informed care
Decision making	Technology issues	Cultural competency/diversity
Initiative	Attendance/accountability	High-risk issues
Professionalism	Engagement skills	Trainings/professional development
Judgment	Interpersonal skills	Time management
Self-care	Screening skills	Motivational interviewing
Problem solving	Documentation	
Communication skills		

Integrating Peer Specialists Into Existing Teams

An important component of effectively onboarding new peer specialists at Oaks Integrated Care is ensuring that non-peer staff members understand the benefits and value that peer specialists bring to the organization. It is also important to distill for non-peer staff members what peer specialists do and do not do to establish appropriate expectations. Activities that can help successfully integrate peer specialists into existing teams include establishing clear, written protocols related to roles, duties, and responsibilities and conducting regular group supervision meetings (*phone interview with Kacey Batushansky, 2020*).

Note On Retaining Peer Specialists

In an increasingly competitive environment, recruiting, hiring, and onboarding peer specialists is only the first path to success. It is important that agencies and programs think about retaining and supporting peer specialists before they are hired to ensure that they will want to stay long-term. Without a focus on the environment and the importance of value and retention, you may end up with a revolving door of peer specialists. Creating a recovery-oriented environment for your staff, ensuring a strong supervision plan, and promoting wellness and self-care for all employees will increase retention rates for peer specialists once hired. Ensuring a supportive environment for all employees and creating a culture that peer specialists want to work within will also promote better recruitment opportunities for the future. There are four ingredients that build a culture where employees want to stay: professional development, recognition, purpose, and leadership (*Spence 2021*). So, as you are designing and preparing to recruit, hire, and onboard peer specialists, there are several things to consider:

1. Do your employees have opportunities to develop and grow professionally? What can you offer to new peer specialists that can help them grow?
2. How do you formally and informally demonstrate to employees that they are valued? What ways can you promote and recognize peer specialists within your program?

3. Peer specialists come into a program with lived experience and a strong individual purpose, but is that aligning with the purpose of the organization? Do employees feel that the agency emphasizes their mission and vision and does not ignore these for other priorities?
4. Does leadership support the employees? Will the supervisors offer a collaborative and encouraging environment for newly hired peer specialists?

Conclusion

Thoughtfully applying the resources, tools, and strategies discussed in this TA package when recruiting, hiring, and onboarding new peer specialists will help your organization prevent common pitfalls and more quickly resolve workplace challenges. Creating a warm and welcoming environment for new peer specialists while keeping existing staff members informed and educated about the value of PRSS will foster a cohesive team environment, leading to increased job satisfaction for everyone. Readers are encouraged to revisit these tools and resources often and to adapt them as necessary throughout the hiring and onboarding process. For additional resources, visit <https://www.cossup.org/>.

Additional Resources

- [Supporting and Managing Peer Specialists: Supervision of Peer Recovery Support Services](#). Strategies, tools, and resources for providing effective supervision to peer specialists.
- [The Provider's Handbook on Developing and Implementing Peer Roles](#). Describes best practices in peer support, offers tips based on real-world examples, and provides “nuts and bolts” tools and resources for developing and implementing peer roles.
- [Peer Support Toolkit](#). Step-by-step guidance for building a peer support program within SUD treatment programs, including templates, tools, resources, and real-world examples.
- [Supervision of Peer Workers](#). Introduces supervising peer specialists with links to detailed training tools, a supervisor self-assessment, and supervisor resources.
- [Strategies for Supervising Peer Workers](#). Discusses peer support roles and strategies for providing effective supervision to peer specialists.

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Appendix A: Sample Peer Specialist Job Descriptions

Sample: Oaks Integrated Care Recovery Specialist Job Description

ROLE

As a Recovery Specialist you will work in a community based, supportive housing program providing services to individuals with Opioid/Substance Use Disorders located in Trenton, Mercer County, NJ.

RESPONSIBILITIES

- Develop a recovery plan in collaboration with the participant, to include culturally competent and relevant services, identify goals with measurable objectives, assesses strengths, and identify barriers to recovery.
- Educate participants on how to appropriately navigate treatment, social service, and recovery support systems.
- Provide recovery support services based on participant preference and assessed needs.
- Support participants as they move through the stages of change to encourage them in their recovery.
- Assist participants with accessing recovery support services in the community.
- Help participants maintain healthy community, family, and social functioning.
- Be a positive role model by appropriately sharing experiential knowledge, hope, and skills.
- Maintain ethical boundaries with participants.
- Maintain relationships with participants to assist them in the treatment engagement and retention process.
- Reinforce, guide, and ensure participants that recovery is possible and is built on personal strengths, coping abilities, and resources.
- Assist participants in gaining skills and resources needed to initiate and maintain recovery.
- Assist in establishing and sustaining a social and physical environment supportive of recovery.
- Enhance identification and participation in the recovery community.
- Advocate for appropriate and effective community treatment and recovery.
- Empower participants to make self-determined and self-directed choices about their recovery pathway.
- Provide support with face-to-face sessions and/or telephone support based on the participant's preference.
- Work collaboratively with the Case Manager to ensure the participant engages in services up to one year.
- Maintain follow-up one year after starting the program.

Sample: Oaks Integrated Care Recovery Specialist Job Description (continued)

BENEFITS

- Competitive base salary
- Medical and dental insurance
- Vision plan
- Retirement plan
- Flexible spending plans
- Excellent time benefits
- Opportunity for personal and career growth
- Team oriented environment

QUALIFICATIONS/REQUIREMENTS

- High school diploma or equivalent required.
- Experience in recovery support services and working with homeless population and individuals with substance use disorders preferred.
- Bilingual preferred.

All positions require a valid driver's license in good standing, pre-employment drug screening, and criminal background check. Oaks Integrated Care considers applicants for all positions without regard to race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, sexual orientation, marital or veteran status, the presence of a medical condition, genetic information or handicap, unrelated to performing the tasks of the job, or any other legally protected status.

Sample: Certified Recovery Specialist Job Description

ROLE

The Recovery Specialist's role is to support others in recovery from a substance use disorder. The Recovery Specialist will serve as a role model, mentor, advocate, and motivator to recovering individuals to help prevent return to use and promote long-term recovery. The Recovery Specialist must demonstrate an ability to share personal recovery experiences and to develop authentic peer-to-peer relationships.

RESPONSIBILITIES

- Maintain project logs, reports and records in appropriate files and database(s).
- Provide recovery education to service recipients for every phase of the recovery journey from pre-recovery engagement, recovery initiation, recovery stabilization, and sustained recovery maintenance.
- Provide a model for both people in recovery and staff by demonstrating that recovery is possible.
- Assist recovering persons to identify their personal interests, goals, strengths, and weaknesses regarding recovery.
- Assist participants in developing their own plan for advancing their recovery.
- Recovery Planning—facilitate (via personal coaching) the transition from a professionally directed service plan to a self-directed Recovery Plan. The goal should be to transition from professionally assisted recovery initiation to personally directed, community-supported recovery maintenance.
- Promote self-advocacy by assisting persons in recovery to have their voices fully heard; their needs, goals, and objectives established as the focal point of rehabilitation and clinical services.
- Actively identify and support linkages to community resources (communities of recovery, educational, vocational, social, cultural, spiritual resources, mutual self-help groups, professional services, etc.) that support the recovering person's goals and interests. This will involve a collaborative effort including the recovering person, agency staff, and other relevant stakeholders.
- Support connections to community based, mutual self-help groups. Link individuals to appropriate professional resources when needed. Provide vision-driven hope and encouragement for opportunities at varying levels of involvement in community-based activities (e.g., work, school, relationships, physical activity, self-directed hobbies, etc.).
- Develop relationships with community groups/agencies in partnership with others in the agency.
- As recovery specialist position evolves and knowledge increases, visit community resources with recovering persons to assist them in becoming familiar with potential opportunities.
- Identify barriers (internal and external) to full participation in community resources and developing strategies to overcome those barriers.
- Maintain contact by phone and/or email with recovering person after they leave the program to ensure their ongoing success and to provide reengagement support in partnership with others in the agency if needed. Long-term engagement, support, and encouragement.
- Other duties as directed by Executive Director and/or Management Staff.
- Develop, implement, and promote ongoing community training opportunities.
- Work with staff and other community professionals to implement and promote recovery-oriented training programs and opportunities.

Sample: Certified Recovery Specialist Job Description (continued)

SALARY RANGE

- \$XX,XXX–\$XX,XXX

QUALIFICATIONS/REQUIREMENTS

- High school diploma/G.E.D.
- Meet the qualifications for certification as a Certified Recovery Specialist
- Worked within the last three years
- Understand and respect each unique path to recovery
- Working knowledge of the substance use disorder treatment system
- Demonstrated commitment to the recovery community

**Sample: Treatment Agency Peer Advocate Job Description: Certified Recovery Peer Advocate
Medicaid Billable Position**

ROLE

Certified Recovery Peer Advocates (CRPA) assist individuals in recovery from addiction with setting and pursuing their recovery goals, monitoring their progress, lending assistance with treatment, modeling effective coping techniques and self-help strategies, and supporting individuals in advocating for themselves to obtain effective services. Position is located at our agency.

EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS

Minimum High School Diploma or equivalent. Must meet education and other baseline criteria for certification as a Certified Recovery Peer Advocate or CRPA-Provisional.

EXPERIENCE REQUIREMENTS

Certified Recovery Peer Advocate, if in recovery, must be at least two years in recovery and be highly motivated to help others. Must be able to work cooperatively as a member of a team comprised of professionally trained clinicians and counselors. Must possess knowledge and experience with accessing local resources such as housing, medical, and social services. Should have a working familiarity with 12-step programs and an understanding of wellness and recovery principles and behaviors. Candidate must have reliable access to transportation.

PRINCIPAL DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

- Engages with individuals to offer living proof of the transformative power of recovery.
- Exhibits faith in client’s capacity for change; celebrates their recovery achievements.
- Encourages the client’s self-advocacy and economic self-sufficiency.
- Genuinely cares and listens to the client; can be trusted with confidences.
- Facilitates the transition from a professionally directed treatment plan to a client-developed recovery plan and assists in structuring daily activities around this plan.
- Helps resolve personal and environmental obstacles to recovery.
- Assists with linking individuals with sources of sober housing, recovery-conducive employment, health and social services, and support groups (e.g., mutual support or 12-step).
- Serves as a Sober Companion accompanying individuals to appointments with legal, medical, and social service entities.
- Cultivates opportunities for people in recovery to participate in volunteerism and performs other acts of service to the community.
- Facilitates agency-based peer support groups.

OTHER RESPONSIBILITIES

Complies with Agency policies and procedures. Attend trainings, seminars, etc., to increase skill level. Promotes safety of all patients and staff. Contributes to the achievement of organizational goals. Participates as an active and supportive member of the treatment team.

Appendix B: Checklist for the First 90 Days

To help guide peer specialists through the first 90 days, an onboarding checklist can be helpful. This table provides a sample that can be adapted to meet your organization’s needs.

First 30 Days	First 60 Days	First 90 Days
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Review job description and receive training on key tasks. <input type="checkbox"/> Review schedule and daily responsibilities, role, and goals. <input type="checkbox"/> Identify any tools or resources that will be helpful. <input type="checkbox"/> Work with your supervisor to schedule regular check-ins. <input type="checkbox"/> Introduce yourself to the team and coworkers. <input type="checkbox"/> Review roles of the team and expectations of communication and support. <input type="checkbox"/> If possible, connect with a champion or mentor. <input type="checkbox"/> Review agency culture, guiding principles, core values, mission, vision, and services. <input type="checkbox"/> Complete HR required training, review benefits, and complete paperwork. <input type="checkbox"/> Review onboarding process for the next 90 days. <input type="checkbox"/> Review remote and onsite expectations, as well as safety precautions when working with individuals being supported by the organization. <input type="checkbox"/> Review employee tools and supports, for example, identification badge, computer and phone policy, organizational directory, break and lunch areas, office supplies, etc. <input type="checkbox"/> Review agency policy and procedure and employee manuals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Identify areas where you need additional training or tools to successfully do your job. <input type="checkbox"/> Seek feedback from your supervisor on what is working well in addition to growth areas. <input type="checkbox"/> Identify areas or gaps in professional development you want to improve upon. <input type="checkbox"/> Engage in social interaction with the team. <input type="checkbox"/> Create a work-life balance plan. <input type="checkbox"/> Identify people in the organization you want to get to know and the resources they might offer. <input type="checkbox"/> Connect with other peer specialists in your community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Continue to check in on training needs and ways to build upon existing skills with your supervisor. <input type="checkbox"/> Evaluate your current caseload and stress levels and discuss with your supervisor. <input type="checkbox"/> Evaluate your process for time management and prioritization of deliverables. <input type="checkbox"/> Continue to build core competencies, including being an active part of the team, communication, and effectiveness. <input type="checkbox"/> Continue to include quality of work discussions and seek support in growth areas during check-ins.