



Bureau of Justice Assistance

Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program (COSSAP)

Effective Integration Toolkit

# Supporting and Managing Peer Specialists: Supervision of Peer Recovery Support Services

December 2022

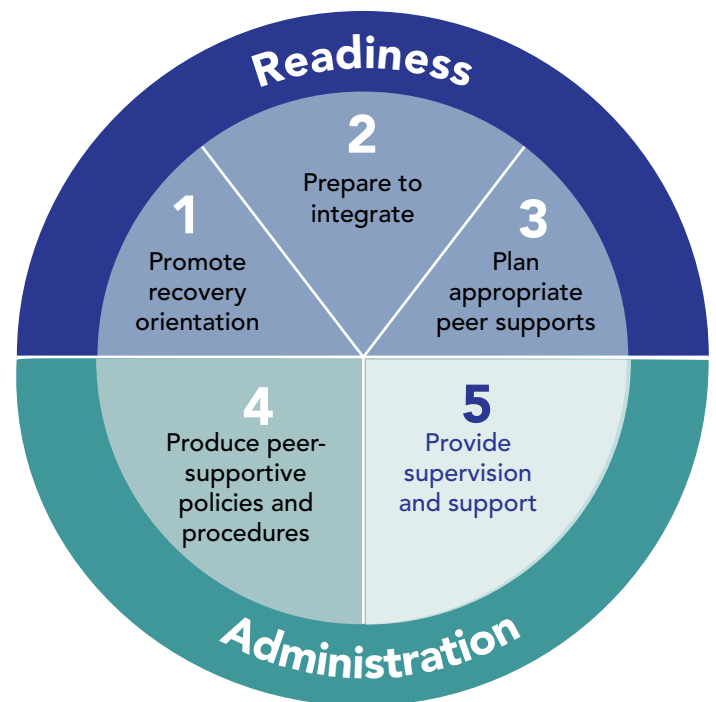
## Overview

As peer specialists move into a variety of roles in the criminal justice system, programs need to carefully plan and prepare to integrate peer supports into their portfolio of services. **This section of the Effective Integration Toolkit focuses on step 5 in the process—providing effective supervision patterned on best practices of peer recovery support services and working with criminal justice populations.**

## Introduction

Peer support is a unique discipline that recognizes that recovery from substance use disorders (SUDs) and co-occurring disorders involves more than symptom reduction or abstinence. Recovery is a process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live self-directed lives, and strive to reach their full potential. Among other things, recovery is supported by peers and allies through relationships and positive social networks (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMSHA] 2012).

Peer recovery support services (PRSS) in criminal justice settings are often implemented in collaboration with



many different partners across different systems.

**Program supervisors play key roles in the successful integration of peer supports within these settings.**

Supervision can be defined as a professional and collaborative process between a supervisor and a worker, in which guidance and support are given to promote competent and ethical delivery of services and supports (SAMHSA, n.d.). Program supervisors can support peer

specialists in three primary ways:

First, because peer specialists fill relatively new and unique roles in some of these systems, there may be a limited understanding of the roles of peers and the value of peer support. The philosophies and values of partnering agencies may not be aligned with recovery-oriented values (SAMHSA, n.d.). **Program supervisors are often the bridge between diverse systems.**

Second, peer specialists may struggle with a lack of role clarity. Coworkers, partners, and sometimes peer specialists themselves may ask what peer support work is supposed to look like. Implementing PRSS within criminal justice settings can be particularly challenging as peer roles may differ significantly from one setting to another. For example, peer support roles in a mobile outreach program to divert criminal justice involvement or to ease reentry after incarceration may require different peer and supervision skills than the services provided within incarcerated settings (SAMHSA, 2017). **Program supervisors help clarify the roles of peer specialists as they provide guidance on how to achieve overarching goals.**

Third, peer specialists struggle with isolation and role strain, particularly if they are the only peer specialist within their organization. This can sometimes cause them to become less recovery-oriented, less likely to adopt clinical or social services language, or to abandon the values of peer support in their work. Alternatively, role strain can lead peer staff members to “turn against the system,” causing them to experience distrust from non-peer staff members and to complicate their integration into the service team. In this context, **program supervisors should thoughtfully and intentionally support peer specialists to (a) maintain the “peerness” of the services and supports offered, (b) ensure the well-being of those served, and at the same time, (c) facilitate the just and respectful treatment of peer specialists** (City of Philadelphia DBHIDS, n.d.).

This technical assistance (TA) package examines the broad functions of supervision, the core competencies that PRSS program supervisors need, and structures of supervision

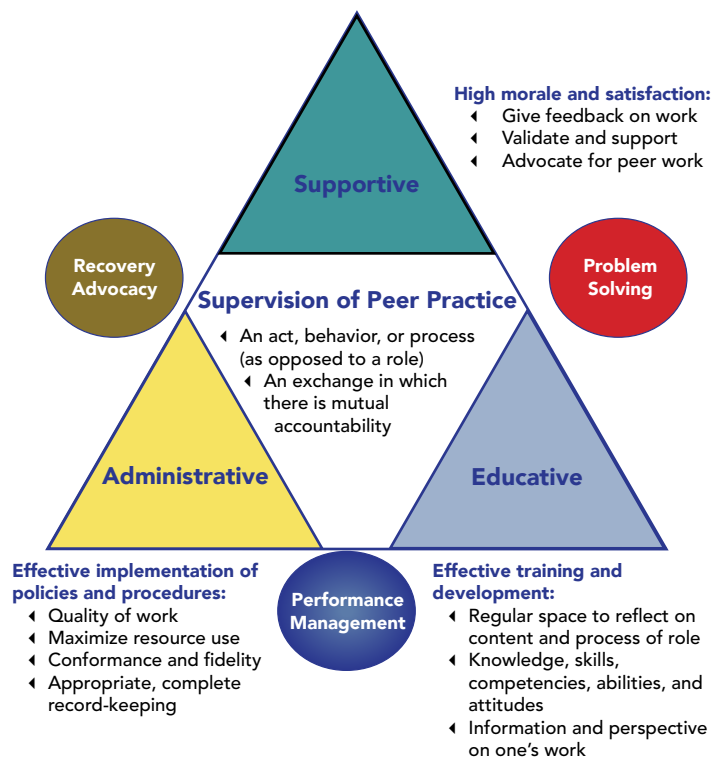


Figure 1. Three Functions of Supervision

that can help peer specialists succeed.

## Supervision Functions

There are three broad functions of supervision: (1) supportive, (2) educative, and (3) administrative (Smith, MK., 1996–2011). These functions, adapted to the context of PRSS, are depicted in figure 1. The process of supportive supervision helps to foster high morale and satisfaction; individuals receive feedback, validation, and support. The process of educative supervision ensures effective training and development. It includes providing regular space and time to reflect on peer practice and consistent opportunities to develop knowledge, skills, and competencies. Administrative processes promote the effective implementation of policies and procedures and conformance to standards for high-quality practice. This framework can be useful in identifying and clarifying the tasks of supervision.

Although they are described as discrete dimensions, in practice, the three functions are intertwined. A supervision

task, such as discussing a recovery planning session, may have elements of support (giving feedback), education (role-playing to practice a new skill), and administration (ensuring that notes for the session are appropriately completed). This interplay promotes the command of three core responsibilities—problem-solving, performance management, and recovery championship—that program supervisors should assume, which in turn anchor the successful integration of peer supports.

## Supervision Competencies

Competencies are the combination of observable on-the-job behaviors and measurable knowledge, skills, and attitudes that demonstrate the ability to perform a job competently. In addition to the general competencies that any supervisor needs, there are several specific competencies that are integral to the supervision of PRSS programs (Daniels and Tunner et al., 2015; Martin and Jordan et al., 2017). Ten core competencies are summarized below. Developing these competencies can prepare program supervisors to effectively support peer specialists in their work and address challenges to program implementation that may arise.

- 1. Understand peer roles and practices.** Program supervisors must fully comprehend a variety of peer roles and tasks, have a deep understanding of the core competencies of peer specialists, and understand the specific duties of the individuals on their team. Supervisors can learn more about the fundamentals of peer support and peer roles by participating in core and advanced trainings for peer support specialists and by conducting in-person or virtual visits to operational PRSS programs.
- 2. Use strengths-based supervision.** If we start with the premise that peer support is strengths-focused, person-centered, and self-directed, it stands to reason that the supervision of peer supports should also be. Strengths-based supervision is a collaborative process that draws on an individual's strengths and assets, frames problems as learning opportunities, and provides opportunities for self-assessment and

feedback. The goals of strengths-based supervision are to:

- ◀ Facilitate the development of competent staff members who make good decisions.
- ◀ Identify and amplify competencies.
- ◀ Share responsibility for setting learning goals.
- ◀ Frame issues and problems as learning opportunities.
- ◀ Share the responsibilities, challenges, and successes of tasks to be accomplished.
- ◀ Assist peer specialists in empowering program participants to achieve their desired recovery outcomes (Lowe and Deal, 2014).

Traditional and clinical approaches to supervision are generally more directive and authoritarian, less collaborative, and typically focused on performance inspection rather than guidance for problem-solving (NASTAD, 2016).

- 3. Enhance and develop the unique competencies needed for peer practice.** The most fundamental competency that a peer specialist brings to the work is their lived experience of recovery from SUDs and/or mental health disorders. Certified peer specialists receive additional training that further develops core competencies, such as relationship building, communication, meaningful disclosure of lived experience, and recovery and wellness planning. Program supervisors must understand that certification training is general. New peer specialists will need specialized support for on-the-job training. This may come directly from the supervisor through in-service trainings, individual instruction, or coaching. It may also come via classes, conferences, webinars, and other trainings provided by local, state, or national training centers. Program supervisors assist peer specialists in identifying appropriate learning opportunities and in structuring personal development plans.
- 4. Provide space to address ethical and boundary issues.** Program supervisors must be aware of the

ethical standards specific to peer supports and understand the common issues that arise for peer specialists. Supervisors must also recognize the difference between boundary issues and ethical violations. The nature of peer support means that these distinctions can be very nuanced and very different from those used by clinicians or social workers. Supervision provides the opportunity to review agency and peer codes of conduct and to apply those codes to boundary issues through role-playing and case examples.

**5. Engage peer specialists in developing and strengthening the PRSS program.** Program supervisors are called upon to work with peer specialists, other key staff members, and partners to identify barriers to implementation and find solutions to them. Peer specialists often have detailed knowledge of individuals' experiences (good or bad) with a program, organization, or system, either from lived experience or from interaction with participants. This can lead to program improvement if the ideas and resourcefulness of peer specialists are routinely used.

**6. Foster a recovery orientation within the program and organization.** Peer support thrives within a recovery-centered context. Program supervisors have roles to play in operationalizing recovery- and resiliency-oriented values within the program and organization. It is the supervisor who ensures that peer specialists identify and build upon participant strengths, offer stage-of-change-appropriate services, support multiple pathways to recovery, address ongoing barriers to recovery, practice appropriate self-disclosure, and assist participants to self-direct their recovery. PRSS programs are more successful in agencies where supervisors model these values in their work and where host organizations build these values into their policies, procedures, and practices. Supervisors play a central role in developing recovery-oriented, peer-supportive policies and procedures.

**7. Clarify organizational systems, structures, and processes.** Organizations can be complex, as can their policies. Program supervisors help peer

specialists fully understand, appreciate, and effectively work within their own organization, as well as with community partners. This includes ensuring role and task clarity for peer specialists and those working with them, providing clarity for how participants will connect with peer specialists, and directing processes for how they will be engaged both on and off-site.

**8. Assist with system navigation.** In their daily work, peer specialists may be in contact with many different systems: behavioral health, health care, courts, law enforcement, probation and parole, child welfare, social services, and others. In helping individuals with complex medical, mental health, and SUD needs, peer specialists can face major obstacles that are systemic and complicated, such as the lack of resources to refer participants, long waiting lists to treatment, insurance problems, and stigma. Often peer specialists feel that it is their job to fill these gaps. Program supervisors can help peer staff members understand the nuances of working with these systems, problem-solve around resource issues, and maintain realistic and optimistic goals within the context of peer support. Program supervisors also find and share needed information and model appropriate use of community resources.

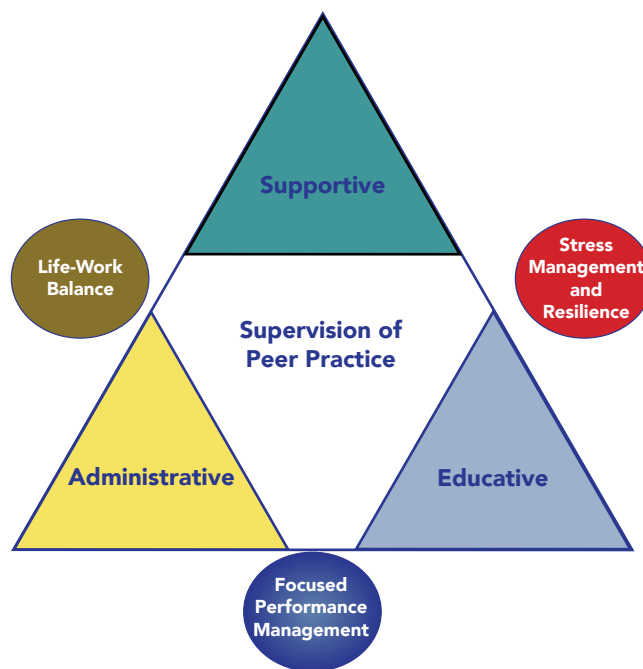


Figure 2. Core Supervision Functions and Self-Care

**9. Promote self-care.** Peer practice seeks to support people in their recovery, as opposed to supporting people in their treatment. To do so, peer specialists must have lived experience of addiction and recovery, and they must maintain their recovery while supporting others. This requires effective self-care. All three functions of supervision and core supervision practices help peer specialists in practicing occupational self-care. Supportive supervision can help peer staff members access appropriate resources to accomplish their jobs, manage their time, and balance their workload. Supportive supervision also encourages nurturing conditions that encourage self-efficacy and success. Program supervisors can help peer staff members develop a self-care plan to minimize burnout, compassion fatigue, vicarious traumatization, and substance use triggers (Martin and Jordan, 2017). It is important that the program supervisor avoid taking on the role of therapist, diagnostician, or sponsor. Instead, supervision should model the peer practice of linking people to resources by helping the peer specialist find the outside support they need to care for themselves. Educative supervision develops the competencies peer specialists need to be most effective in their work, and administrative supervision focuses on the accurate implementation of all policies and procedures set by the organization; both can decrease job stress by

addressing implementation issues in a timely manner.

**10. Advocate for peer supports across the organization and in the community.** Peer support is not always understood, appreciated, or welcomed by non-peer staff members within an organization or in partner agencies. Program supervisors advocate for and promote PRSS within their organization and across the wider systems in which peer specialists work. Supervisors educate others about peer support roles and practices, support meaningful roles for peer specialists, create opportunities for peer specialists to interact with others and demonstrate their value, and work with leadership to create more optimal conditions for peer specialists.

## Supervision Structures

The most important requirement of successful supervision is that it happens with adequate frequency; the second most important is that it be appropriate—that is, tailored to and supportive of the roles of peer specialists. In settings where there is a limited understanding of the role and value of peer support, supervision must include thoughtful, intentional support of peer specialists to (a) maintain the peer nature of the services and supports offered, (b) ensure the well-being of those served, and (c) facilitate the just and respectful treatment of peer staff members.

Table 1. Summary of Supervision Forms

Supervision Type	Advantages	Disadvantages
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◀ Exclusive attention to the worker</li> <li>◀ Often experienced as safer for the worker</li> <li>◀ More confidential</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◀ Dependence can develop</li> <li>◀ Exposure to only one perspective in supervision</li> <li>◀ No opportunity to learn from colleagues</li> </ul>
Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◀ More efficient than individual supervision</li> <li>◀ Supervisees share information and may learn from each other</li> <li>◀ Can be a powerful way to reduce isolation and may foster group cohesion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◀ Working in a group can be experienced as unsafe by some workers</li> <li>◀ May be difficult to meet the specific needs of participants</li> <li>◀ Discussions remain generalized rather than specific</li> </ul>
Co-Supervision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◀ Guidance of more than one person, especially one who has expertise in peer support</li> <li>◀ Functions of supervision can be split, with one supervisor focusing on supportive and educative supervision the other on administrative functions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◀ Some agencies lack the resources to offer co-supervision</li> <li>◀ There may be challenges in communication or disagreements between the co-supervisors</li> <li>◀ Co-supervisors may not share the same expectations</li> </ul>

## Supervision of Peer Support Assessment

### 1. Our PRSS program provides peer supervisors with the support that will enable them to gain the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and attributes necessary to effectively supervise peer specialists in a criminal justice setting through:

- Training in core competencies for new peer supervisors.
- Advanced training that relates to the knowledge and skills peer supervisors need in their role.
- Encouraging peer supervisors to practice and model wellness and appropriate self-care.

### 2. Our PRSS program supervisors are trained in quality supervisory skills, including:

- Having a good understanding of strengths-based, person-centered, and recovery-oriented approaches and modeling this in practice.
- Understanding and supporting the role and practices of PRSS, providing role clarity, and advocating for peers while supporting compliance with the criminal justice system.
- Providing space to address ethical and boundary issues, issues of confidentiality, and applicable laws and regulations.
- Identifying and evaluating peer competencies while empowering enhanced motivation, autonomy, problem-solving skills, self-reflection and awareness, comprehensive training, skill building, and learning among peer staff members.
- Recognizing connections between behavioral health conditions, trauma, health disparities, and social inequity.

### 3. Our program provides:

- Strengths-based supervision, support, and performance evaluation using a variety of methods.
- Regular guidance, support, and skills-building through non-clinical supervision of all peer specialists.
- Supervision that promotes opportunities for skill building and learning.
- A supervisory relationship that helps peer specialists solve problems and become more self-reflective about their work.

### 4. Our PRSS program provides opportunities to address boundary-related issues through:

- Peer supervision.
- Regular dialogue and support on how to negotiate shifting roles.
- Training and other learning opportunities.

Supervision can take different forms depending on the organizational resources and context where peer support is delivered. When one thinks of supervision, individual supervision is what most commonly comes to mind, but group and co-supervision can also be effective. Each has advantages and disadvantages (summarized in table 1) that must be taken into consideration regarding specific organizational implementation.

The structure and frequency of supervision can be determined by considering the skill level, comfort, and needs of both the peer specialist and the program. For example, a seasoned peer specialist who is facilitating groups on-site may require less frequent one-to-one supervision than a newly trained peer specialist who is providing mobile one-to-one support to individuals in crisis.

## Conclusion

PRSS program supervisors play a key role in the successful integration of peer supports within criminal justice settings.

Supervision of peer supports is a strengths-based process that enhances and develops the unique knowledge and skills necessary for successful peer practice. Three core functions—supportive, educative, and administrative—and the three core responsibilities—problem solving, performance management, and recovery championship—ground the successful integration of peer supports. There are specific core competencies for supervisors, including an understanding of the peer role, using strengths-based supervision, and fostering a recovery orientation.

Supervision can take different forms depending on the organizational resources and the context where peer support is delivered. The structure and frequency of supervision can be determined by considering the skill level, comfort, and needs of both the peer specialist and the program. Developing creative structures for supervision, such as co-supervision, group supervision, and peer-to-peer supervision can ensure that support for peer specialists is available when needed and can ensure consistent opportunities for other meaningful elements of supervision to occur.

For more resources related to the supervision of peer support or to request training and technical assistance, visit [cossapresources.org](http://cossapresources.org).

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## About Altarum

Altarum is a nonprofit research and consulting organization that creates and implements solutions to advance health among vulnerable and publicly insured populations. Under a grant from BJA, Altarum provides nationwide training and technical assistance to COAP/COSSAP grantees, states, and communities to build, enhance, and sustain peer recovery support services programs as part of multidisciplinary criminal justice responses to the opioid epidemic. To learn more about the PRSS Training and Technical Assistance Center, visit URL. To learn more about Altarum, visit [www.altarum.org](http://www.altarum.org).

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Visit the COSSAP Resource Center at [www.cossapresources.org](http://www.cossapresources.org).

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