

Peer Support Specialists: A Growing Mental Health and Addictions Workforce



Peer Support Specialists (also known as PSSs, recovery coaches, family support providers, and youth peer workers) are people with lived/living experience of a mental health and/or substance use condition. Lived and living experience is defined by SAMHSA as the personal knowledge, awareness, and understanding gained through direct involvement in life events, particularly those related to mental health, substance use, and recovery.¹ PSSs provide support services to

individuals experiencing similar challenges,² and they perform a wide range of nonclinical community-based activities including: advocacy, system navigation, and linkage to resources. PSSs do this through sharing experience, social support, group facilitation, skill building, mentoring, and goal setting towards sustained recovery process.

PSSs are a rapidly expanding segment of the workforce across the United States. Over the past decade, the number of certified PSSs has grown from approximately 30,000 to 82,000 nationally.³ Almost all states have developed standards including training and certification programs to prepare and credential PSSs. PSSs are providing support services in a wide array of settings including peer operated service and/or recovery community organizations, outpatient treatment, hospitals and emergency rooms, schools, universities, jails/prisons, employment, housing, maternal health, faith communities and more. Overall, [43%](#) of all mental health

¹ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (n.d.). *Lived experience*. SAMHSA. Retrieved from <https://www.samhsa.gov/>

² Opie JE, et al. Training of lived experience workforces: A rapid review of content and outcomes. Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research 2022 (in press).

³ Peer Center of Excellence. (2024, August). *National distribution of peer support specialists in the United States by state, district and territory*. Peer Center of Excellence.

facilities and approximately [two-thirds](#) of all substance use treatment facilities offer peer services.

Providing PSS services is an evidence-based practice. [Research](#) has shown that the use of PSSs can:



- Reduce inpatient utilization including re-hospitalization rates
- Reduce the overall cost of health and behavioral health services



- Increase the use of outpatient services
- Increase hope and quality of life measures
- Increase engagement into services



- Support and increase positive outcomes linked to sustained recovery
- Increase focus on whole health care

As the PSSs workforce has grown, there have been challenges [identified](#) including the need for:



- A welcoming workplace culture that understands and values the role of PSSs



- Adequate [compensation](#) for PSSs
- Greater racial, ethnic, sexual orientation and gender identity among PSSs

For more information on PSSs , see:

- [SAMHSA’s National Model Standards for Peer Support Certification](#)
- [Core Competencies for Peer Workers](#)
- [TIP 64: Incorporating Peer Support Into Substance Use Disorder Treatment Services](#)
- [National Technical Assistance Centers for Mental Health Recovery](#)
- [SAMHSA Program to Advance Recovery Knowledge](#)
- [Issue Brief: Expanding Peer Support and Supporting the Peer Workforce in Mental Health](#)
- [Financing Peer Recovery Support: Opportunities to Enhance the Substance Use Disorder Workforce](#)
- [Peer Center of Excellence](#)