

Massachusetts  
Certified Peer Specialist Program  
Policy Manual

Approved by the CPS Oversight Committee

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## BACKGROUND

### Overview

The Massachusetts Certified Peer Specialist Program is a training and certification program designed to prepare people for work in the role of *Peer and Recovery Specialist*. A Certified Peer Specialist (CPS) is a person with lived experience of a mental health condition who works in collaboration with other service providers, yet fills a unique role. As someone who is, “in but not of the system,” the CPS is able to build relationships, provide support, and advocate for people using services from a position of understanding and mutuality. Because of the complexity of this role training is essential and our exam-based certification provides evidence that the CPS has mastered the basic competencies needed for the job.

### The Profession

CPS practice revolves around the skilled sharing of personal lived experience moving from unwellness to recovery. CPSs may share common tasks with other recovery-oriented practitioners, but the emphasis and the value of the role is to inspire belief in recovery by presenting the “evidence” that recovery is possible through the person working as a CPS.

While CPSs can and do work in a multitude of settings, the most common workplace for CPS practice is within the traditional mental health system. This is the place with the greatest need for those who can say, “I’ve been where you are and I’m not there anymore...”. The traditional mental health system also has some flexibility in being able to fund these positions, which early research findings show to be as effective, if not more so, than traditional mental health workers.

Current CPSs are pioneers who serve as change agents within a system steeped in traditional roles, expectations, and professions. They often work in isolation with few, if any, other CPSs working in their department or agency. The certified peer specialist role requires an individual to bring forward messages of recovery, to demonstrate new approaches to practice and perspective, and to present new ideas about personal power, choice, self-determination, recovery, and hope. It is a profession that requires skills, knowledge, fortitude, and courage. At the same time, it is a profession that brings incredible fulfillment as personal, painful experiences transform into tools that can compassionately be passed on to another person in ways that can significantly impact his/her life.

### History of the Massachusetts CPS Program

The first CPS class in Massachusetts was held in 2006 when the state received a federal Transformation Grant. These grants were issued following the 2003 Presidential New Freedom Commission Report, which stated that the nation’s mental health services system was in dire need of change. The Massachusetts CPS Initiative was driven in part by the Transformation Committee (TRANSCOM), formed in 2004, which recommended establishing a peer workforce.

TRANSCOM was formed of diverse stakeholders, including people with lived experience, staff from provider agencies, the Association for Behavioral Health (ABH), Massachusetts Behavioral Health Partnership (MBHP), the Department of Mental Health (DMH), the Department of Public Health (DPH), UMass Medical Center, Recovery Learning Communities (RLCs), Consumer Quality Initiatives (CQI), the Transformation Center, and the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission. In its position paper issued in 2008 and titled, *Peers as Valued Workers: A Massachusetts Roadmap for successfully integrating Peer Specialists and Peer Support Workers into the Public Mental Health System*, TRANSCOM made the following recommendations to DMH:

- Define roles and functions of Certified Peer Specialists and Peer Workers (note that these were originally envisioned by TRANSCOM as two different roles)
- Articulate the value of certification for Peer Specialists
- Provide training and continuing education for Peer Workers
- Fund Peer Specialists and Peer Support Workers appropriately
- Train and educate the provider community on integrating Peer Roles
- Offer technical assistance to providers on workforce issues

As a result of these discussions, it was agreed that Massachusetts would adopt the “Georgia” model of CPS training as it was firmly established, was already Medicaid-approved, and had solved issues related to state and federal regulations.

Conversations with the Georgia training team, Larry Fricks and Ike Powell of the Appalachian Consulting Group, resulted in an agreement that M-Power/The Transformation Center would spearhead efforts in Massachusetts, that a group of Massachusetts peers from the state would be trained in Georgia, and that the Georgia Training team would then come to Massachusetts to train CPS Trainers and help kick off the first two Massachusetts classes.

In 2005, five advocates from Massachusetts attended the Certified Peer Specialist (CPS) training offered in Georgia and passed the CPS exam. The first Massachusetts class was held in August 2005, co-taught by the Georgia and Massachusetts training teams. In November, 2005, the Massachusetts team taught the class under the supervision of the Georgia team. Since that time, CPS classes have been held at least annually across the state.

For the first 4 classes, while the training team honed its skills to deliver the training and examination, the program was delivered exactly as it is done in Georgia. The original Georgia training was 8 days long, held over 8 days in a row with a weekend off in the middle. Groups would come to a hotel on Sunday and classes would be held all day Monday through Friday. People would leave for the weekend, returning again on Sunday, with classes held from Monday through mid-afternoon Wednesday. Over time, it became evident that this format was helpful for people with a strong foundation in recovery principles and a long history in the advocacy movement. With these foundations firmly in place, a good portion of the curriculum was merely a review, significantly reducing the amount of new material that needed to be learned in order to pass the certification exam.

Since that time, modifications have been made to address the specific needs of service providers and service users in Massachusetts and to maximize the skills of the evolving training team. These modifications have included some shifts in the curriculum and a change in the overall format of the training. The format was changed to provide participants with more time to absorb the material, to have the opportunity to reflect upon and use their new skills during the training, and to make stronger connections with other peers in their region. Training program modifications are developed by the CPS Training Team and are presented to the CPS Oversight Committee. Information on the current format for the training is available from the CPS Training Program Coordinator.

### **Staffing and Administration**

The Transformation Center is the administrative body for the CPS Certification Program. As of 2014, the responsibility for the day-to-day management of the CPS Certification Program belongs to the CPS Training Program Coordinator. This position reports to the Executive Director of the Transformation Center and works collaboratively with the CPS Training Team.

The Training Team delivers the CPS Training Program and conducts the examination process. To provide consistency and support in record-keeping, internal communication, and management of policies and procedures, a CPS Liaison is appointed to work with both the CPS Oversight Committee and the CPS Training Program Coordinator. Information on current staffing is available from the CPS Training Program Coordinator.

### **Program Oversight**

The Transformation Center believes it is important for the CPS Certification to be meaningful and respected in the community. In 2008, a volunteer Oversight Committee was formed, composed of subject matter experts in such areas as rehabilitation and recovery, education and training, research and testing, DMH policies and practices, MBHP policies and programs, MassHealth policies and programs, clubhouse practices, and provider agencies throughout the state. The CPS Oversight Committee consists of members from the provider community, the peer community, the CPS community, and is charged with:

- Ensuring that the Certification process is operated in a way that is consistent with traditional and established practices for professional certification
- Ensuring that the Certification Examination is constructed and scored in a way that meets standardized testing practices
- Ensuring that the learning objectives of the training and the Certification Examination are in alignment
- Ensuring that CPS core competencies are reflected in the training and examination
- Advising the CPS Training Program Coordinator on policy and procedural issues
- Addressing any grievances or appeals from participants regarding the training or certification exam, including failure to pass the exam or any other situation that results in denial of Certification

## POLICIES

### Overview

Policies relate to the formation and management of the Oversight Committee itself, application to the training program, and the examination process. A separate Procedures manual contains procedural guidelines, and is updated at least annually.

### Statement of Intent

In keeping with the values and principles of the peer community, this Policy Manual is made publicly available for the purpose of full transparency. Questions and comments about the Policy Manual may be submitted to the CPS Training Program Coordinator (contact information is posted on the Transformation Center website).

### Revision of Policies

The Policy Manual is to be updated at least every five years and revised as needed. Other than minor edits (such as changes in punctuation or formatting), changes need to be approved by 75% of the members of the CPS Oversight Committee, although the CPS Oversight Committee recognizes that full consensus is preferred. Once approved by the CPS Oversight Committee, the Policy Manual is submitted to the Transformation Center Board of Directors, who will approve it in keeping with their standard voting policies and procedures. A separate Procedures Manual which includes recommendations for daily management practices is updated annually and requires the approval of the CPS Oversight Committee, but not the Transformation Center Board of Directors.

### CPS Training Program Application

*Eligibility:* The CPS Training Program maintains specific entry requirements, which are evident in the application form. These include the requirement that applicants have lived experience of a mental health condition, and be willing to share that experience as part of their work as a CPS.

*Availability:* Applications and related materials are made available on the Transformation Center website. After class dates are announced, a link from the main page of the website is added to assist navigation.

*Applicant Interviews:* Applicants are required to attend a face-to-face interview as the initial step in the application process. A standardized procedure is used to make the interview process as objective as possible. At least two interviewers are present for the interview with each applicant, and give independent ratings according to a set of guidelines prepared in advance of the interview process and used consistently in all interviews.

*Submission:* The application packet must be completed and signed by the applicant, must include written references, and must be submitted according to the procedure indicated in the application materials.

*Application Review:* A standardized procedure is employed for evaluating applications. Each written application is reviewed by two evaluators, using a structured evaluation tool (prepared in advance) to maximize consistency across reviews and to decrease the possibility of subjectivity. In order to ensure an objective review, reviewers are assigned based on who is the *least*

familiar with the applicant. The only information considered in the review of the application is that provided in the application itself, in the submitted references, and during the interview.

*Acceptance decisions:* Many factors must be considered in making a final selection, and potentially eligible candidates may, at times, be denied admission. The final decision for admission or denial of admission is based solely on information provided by the applicant through the application, submitted references, and interview process. Based on past experience of trainee success and on funding mandates, considerations for the admissions decision include, but are not limited to, the following:

- The applicant demonstrates a foundation of knowledge and experience in peer-to-peer services and relationships.
- The applicant has basic knowledge about how the Massachusetts mental health system has been shifting from a medical model to a recovery model.
- The applicant has knowledge of recovery through reading, exposure to peer leaders such as Pat Deegan and others, and personal experience
- The applicant will contribute to the mandate to compose a class that includes geographic diversity as well as different perspectives and world views.

*Diversity:* The CPS Training Program selects applicants, in part, with concern for diversity within any training class. Diversity of backgrounds and perspectives enriches dialogue within the class and helps ensure that the variety of people who use peer services will be best able to find peer providers who understand their experiences and worldviews. Factors considered in attending to diversity include ethnic, racial, and cultural heritage; linguistic diversity, including ASL (although applicants must be fluent in English reading and writing); geographic diversity within the Commonwealth of Massachusetts; gender; sexual preference; and, for those applicants currently working, type of practice setting. The Transformation Center is an equal opportunity employer and the CPS Training Program is an equal opportunity educational program that does not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, national origin, religion, age, hearing status, disability, covered veteran status, marital status, personal appearance, sexual orientation, family responsibilities, political affiliation, source of income, place of business or residence, pregnancy, childbirth, or any other unlawful basis.

*Notification of Acceptance:* Applicants are notified about the decision to accept or decline their applications by the deadline stated during the interview process. Any applicant who is denied has the right to reapply for a future training class, but will need to submit a new and complete application packet by the deadline for the new class.

### **Training Class Policies and Completion Requirements**

The content of the training program is based on the competencies identified as necessary for employment as an entry level CPS in Massachusetts. From time to time, as knowledge and understanding of the required competencies evolve, the training program content is adapted to meet the needs of the CPS workforce, their supervisors, their funders, and the people using their services.

*Attendance:* Trainees must attend 95% of the training sessions to be eligible for the examination, as described in the trainee orientation materials.

*Participation:* Trainees are expected to be active participants in the training class and to take responsibility for their own learning.

*Homework:* Practice and study activities are assigned for completion outside of class. All of these assignments must be completed by the assignment deadline in order for the trainee to be considered eligible for the examination.

*Cancellation and notification:* In the event that the Governor declares an emergency due to snow, other inclement weather, or some other situation, class are cancelled. Details about the timing and procedure for notifying trainees of a cancellation are provided in the admissions notification and orientation materials. Any cancelled classes are rescheduled, and trainees are required to attend the rescheduled class sessions.

### **Certification Exam**

The certification examination evaluates recall of the knowledge covered in the CPS Training Program and each candidate's ability to apply that knowledge to practice situations.

The examination is offered to trainees who have successfully completed all of the requirements for the training course, and includes both written and oral components. Trainees are fully informed of the examination process and schedule prior to completing their training class. This information is provided in class, with ample time allocated for questions.

Testing dates and times are announced publicly, as described in the training class.

If a trainee has not completed the training course requirements, s/he is awarded a certificate of attendance, rather than a certificate of completion, at the last training class session. Trainees have the option of requesting an individual meeting to discuss the possibility of retaking the class and/or for completing work so as to be eligible for the exam.

*Scoring of the Exam:* To ensure objectivity in the scoring process, the examination results are reviewed and scored according to a pre-determined rating scale for each exam component. At least two members of the Training Team score the exam. The written examination is corrected anonymously—meaning that the person doing the scoring does not know whose exam is being scored. The oral exam is scored immediately and is, of necessity, not anonymous. Rater's scores are combined mathematically to decrease the possibility of bias from any single rater.

*Notification of exam results:* Exam candidates are informed within six weeks of the exam date whether they have passed or not. In order to maintain the integrity and security of the examination, notification of passing or failure does not include a numerical score or any detailed information about what questions were answered correctly or incorrectly. For candidates who do not pass the exam, general guidelines for future studying will be included.

*Examination Retakes:* Candidates are given a total of three *consecutive* opportunities to take the CPS exam.

The three times that a person can take the exam are 1) during the initial examination period following the class; 2) during the next two testing sessions offered immediately following the initial examination.

A person may opt to delay his/her initial testing or skip one of the offered testing sessions; however, the skipped testing session still counts as one of the three testing opportunities.

*Tutoring:* Free tutoring support is offered for training course graduates who are retaking the exam. Tutoring sessions are set up in advance before all testing sessions, and are held at times and in locations to accommodate as many trainees as possible. Phone tutoring sessions are also available.

### **Reasonable accommodations**

Reasonable accommodations are possible for trainees and exam candidates who provide the proper documentation (a brief letter with an original signature from a medical professional describing the need and indicating that the particular need results from a disability). Requests for reasonable accommodations need to be discussed in advance with the CPS Training Program Coordinator. In order to allow time for making the necessary arrangements, the trainee must inform the CPS Training Program Coordinator of his/her intent to request a reasonable accommodation on or before the last training session day. Medical documentation for reasonable accommodations for the examination needs to be received at the Transformation Center at least two weeks in advance of the exam date. Qualified medical professionals for this type of documentation typically include licensed psychologists, neuropsychologists, psychiatrists, other relevantly trained medical doctors, clinical social workers, school psychologists, and psychiatric nurse practitioners.

### **Continuing education**

No continuing education is mandated at this time, however all certificants should be reminded frequently of their responsibility to continue learning throughout their professional careers.

### **Concerns, grievances & appeals**

It is the intent of the CPS program to provide a learning environment that supports the learning of all trainees, not only intellectually, but also emotionally and spiritually. The hope of the CPS training staff is that graduates leave the CPS training course not only with an expanded sense of self as a person, but with a new sense of identity as a Peer Specialist.

The CPS training staff and the administration of the Transformation Center, which sponsors the CPS program, believe that a central role of the CPS training course is to maintain high standards related to CPS practice, including meeting the needs and preferences of people receiving services, colleagues certified as a CPS, employers, and the Commonwealth. Part of the responsibility of maintaining these high standards is to engage in regular evaluation and to remain open to suggestions for change, including establishing a fair and impartial process for addressing any concerns, grievances, and appeals related to CPS training and/or practice.

Correspondence regarding a concern, grievance, or appeal must be prepared, sent, and signed by the person making the complaint.

### **Concerns**

A concern might include a suggestion for improvement or a procedural question requiring clarification. Concerns may be submitted directly, either in writing, by phone, or through email

to the CPS Training Program Coordinator, who attempts to address the concern or resolve the issue to the satisfaction of the person submitting the concern.

### **Grievances**

If the concern is not addressed satisfactorily, or if the concern is a substantial complaint about the CPS program and/or its training staff, a person may submit in writing, via the US Postal Service or other delivery service offering delivery confirmation, a formal *grievance*. The grievance document must be completed and signed by the person filing the grievance, and needs to include:

- the full name, mailing address, phone number, and e-mail contact information for the person filing the grievance
- a description of the nature of the grievance, including the desired resolution

Address the grievance to the CPS Oversight Committee at this address:

CPS Oversight Committee  
c/o Patricia B. Nemeč, CPS Liaison  
696 Kearsarge Mountain Road  
Warner, NH 03278-4032

The CPS Oversight Committee will ensure that the grievance is addressed by Executive Director of the Transformation Center and/or the CPS Training Program Coordinator, who, within 10 business days of receipt of the grievance, reviews, investigates, and replies in a written letter to the complainant outlining what will be done to address or resolve the grievance. This process includes, as needed, gathering additional information from any involved parties, including the complainant. The decision letter includes the process for appeal of the decision, as outlined below.

### **Appeals**

An *appeal* requests an independent review of a decision made by the CPS Training Program Coordinator. The complainant, upon receiving the decision letter, will have 10 business days to submit an appeal in writing to the CPS Oversight Committee Liaison (by certified mail or other delivery service with written delivery confirmation), using the process described below.

Any appeal must be submitted in writing to the CPS Oversight Committee by postal mail (not email or telephone), and will be forwarded to the CPS Oversight Committee. Using delivery confirmation or certified mail, the letter should be sent to the CPS Oversight Committee at the address above.

The appeal must include:

- the full name, mailing address, phone number, and e-mail contact information for the person filing the appeal
- a detailed explanation of the decision that is being appealed, from the perspective of the complainant, including any steps already taken to resolve the issue
- detailed reasons for the appeal

- printed copies of any correspondence from the Transformation Center regarding the concern or grievance, such as a rejection letter, letter providing notification of the exam results, or emails regarding rights to appeal a decision. Note that a clear timeline of events will help the CPS Oversight Committee understand the situation.
- A specific request indicating how the complainant would like to see the issue resolved, naming the actions desired in response to filing the appeal

The CPS Oversight Committee addresses the issue in this manner:

- The CPS Liaison acknowledges receipt of the appeal. If the complainant has not heard from the CPS Oversight Committee within 10 business days of the receipt of the appeal correspondence by the CPS Liaison, the complainant should contact the Director of the Transformation Center to request the attention of the CPS Oversight Committee.
- If necessary, the CPS Liaison or a CPS Oversight Committee member contacts the complainant for additional information, possibly by email to expedite the process. Correspondence with the CPS Oversight Committee *must be in writing* to permit careful tracking and documentation of the issue under appeal. In some instances, the CPS Oversight Committee contacts other parties, such as the CPS training staff, for clarification and confirmation of the actions and timelines that are described in the appeal.
- After obtaining the necessary information, the appeal is presented to the CPS Oversight Committee at their next scheduled meeting for determination of action steps to be taken. Correspondence received by the CPS Liaison is forwarded, with any identifying information deleted, to the CPS Oversight Committee Members for review.

Appeals are addressed by the CPS Oversight Committee as follows:

- The CPS Oversight Committee looks at and discusses the concerns at the first meeting after receiving the appeal. If necessary, the Oversight Committee calls a special meeting or appoints a subcommittee to address the appeal.
- The CPS Oversight Committee creates a plan to address the issue raised in the appeal. The issue at hand, the number of people who need to be consulted, and other factors may affect the time frame for addressing the appeal.
- The Oversight Committee contacts the person filing the appeal if they need further information or clarification, or to advise that person of the process if they do not believe the issue can be resolved or addressed in a timely manner.
- The CPS Oversight Committee, within 20 business days, issues a decision to the individual submitting the appeal, with a copy to the Executive Director of the Transformation Center and/or the CPS Training Program Coordinator, and any other parties named in the appeal. Any preference for the format of the notification—either by email or a certified letter—should be made known in the initial correspondence.
- As a result of its review of the original grievance and the appeal filed, the Oversight Committee will select one or more of these actions:
  - Dismiss the appeal, with no recommended action to be taken.
  - Recommend changes in the CPS training program, policies, and/or procedures.

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- Recommend steps the CPS program staff can take to address the issues raised.
  - Recommend actions for the Transformation Center to take regarding the CPS program staff involved in your complaint or grievance.
  - Recommend actions to the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health (DMH) regarding the CPS program.
  - Consult with DMH regarding how best to address serious practice violations committed by a particular Certified Peer Specialist.
- The decision of the CPS Oversight Committee is final.

The Oversight Committee has established these policies and procedures in order to give a careful review of each complaint and to come to a fair and unbiased resolution.

### **Reciprocity**

The Massachusetts Department of Mental Health has funded the Transformation Center to offer a certification program consisting of *training plus an exam*. As many high quality CPS training programs exist outside of Massachusetts, it is possible that an individual who is certified as a peer specialist in another state or jurisdiction would choose to seek certification within Massachusetts. In this situation, a person may submit a request for reciprocity to the CPS Training Program Coordinator.

“Reciprocity” here refers to recognizing the equivalence of the training, but does not refer to automatically granting a *Massachusetts CPS Certification*. At this time, the Massachusetts CPS program offers certification to confirm that someone has successfully passed the certification exam that is offered as a part of that program. In the event that a person has completed a CPS program elsewhere, that person may request a waiver of the Massachusetts CPS training, based on the existing certification, but not a waiver of the Massachusetts examination.

Any request for reciprocity must be submitted in writing to the CPS Training Program Coordinator by postal mail or email, not by telephone, at the following address:

Martha Barbone, CPS Training Program Coordinator  
cps@transformation-center.org  
The Transformation Center  
98 Magazine Street  
Roxbury, MA 02119

Any request for reciprocity must include the following information:

- the full name, mailing address, phone number, and e-mail contact information of the person requesting to sit for the exam
- the name, location, and dates of the CPS training completed.
- written evidence of the CPS certification, such as an official letter or a copy of the certification itself

- the name, address, telephone number, and email of a contact person who can provide information on the CPS training completed. Note that submitting a request for reciprocity grants permission to the CPS program to confirm the certification.

If the CPS Training Team determines that the training completed is equivalent to the Massachusetts CPS training curriculum, the person will be offered three consecutive opportunities to pass the CPS exam, consistent with the policy for people who complete the Massachusetts CPS training course. Note that:

- The three opportunities include the first three *consecutive* exam offerings following granting the waiver of the training. The CPS Training Program Coordinator has the option of extending the date of the first available exam period if a short timeline (two weeks or less) is likely to create a hardship.
- If the exam candidate does not pass the exam the first time, s/he has the option of using both the second opportunity (the time when the test is next offered) and, if s/he does not pass on the second attempt, a third opportunity (the time when the test is next offered). If the exam candidate decides to skip taking the exam on the first and/or second opportunity, s/he retains the option of taking the test at the third opportunity, but this would then become the last (or only) opportunity to take the examination. In other words, three testing dates are offered; the exam candidate does *not* have the option of taking the test three times on dates of his/her choosing.
- Of course, the CPS Oversight Committee and the CPS Training Team recognize that a failure on the Massachusetts CPS examination does not affect or diminish in any way the certification that was awarded through any previous training.
- Although free tutoring is offered to people who take the CPS training course and do not pass the first exam, this option is not available to individuals who request reciprocity and waive the training, since the funding for the tutoring is considered part of the cost of training. A person requesting to take the exam through a reciprocity arrangement has the option of paying a fee for tutoring from the Transformation Center, or arranging with any other group or individual who offers such tutoring.
- A person requesting to take the exam through a reciprocity arrangement has the option of purchasing a print copy of the Massachusetts CPS training manual at the cost of shipping and handling (to be paid in advance). The copy, or a document included with the copy, indicates that all written course materials should be considered copyrighted, and should not be shared or distributed without written permission of the Transformation Center.
- If the CPS Training Team denies a request for reciprocity, the person filing the request has the option to appeal this decision to the CPS Oversight Committee. Information on the process of filing such an appeal is included in this Policy Manual.

### **Document and data management**

The management of program documents, such as applications, and data, such as personal information on certificants, is handled with careful attention to the privacy of individuals, with respect for and protection of that privacy. Written documents with personal information are retained in a locked file cabinet with restricted access. Electronic data and documents are

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maintained on a secure server with restricted access and password-protected, whenever possible and necessary.