

Transcom Q & A:

Implementing Policies for a Successful Peer Support Workforce

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Introduction

Transcom endorses workplaces and policies that are flexible and recognize and support the humanity of sharing experiences by all employees. We recognize, however, that even in environments where people in other roles are fully supported to share the wisdom gained over their own lifetimes, peer support roles are nonetheless essential. Transcom recognizes that the integration of peer support roles into treatment and community settings leads to notable improvements in the lives of those receiving mental health and substance use services (see footnote for examples of research).¹

How do we define “peer support worker”?

A Peer Support Worker (or Peer Mentor, Recovery Coach, Peer Specialist, etc.) is an individual who volunteers or is employed based on both their skills and training relevant for a given position AND their personal experience with a psychiatric diagnosis, trauma, extreme states, substance use and/or other life struggle through which they have been able to move and gain wisdom. The person in this role is asked to use their story and personal experiences as a regular part of their job and they are asked to approach their position differently than other workers on many levels that are essential to an equitable relationship. For example, the primary responsibility of a peer support worker is to support the voices and choices of people they support. That includes minimizing the power differentials as much as possible, including avoiding responsibilities that have the potential for or appearance of coercion, including medication administration, and the handling of funds. All job duties should support self-determination and be based around an equitable and mutual relationship. Job responsibilities that would take away from the peer support worker’s ability to act in this role should be reconsidered or assigned to others.

What does the peer support workforce do and how should it be utilized?

We believe that when people share their personal stories, it is inspiring, builds relationships and gives new meaning and value to painful experiences. However, the role of peer support includes much more than that. It also includes partnering to overcome personal and environmental obstacles, facilitating connections to community resources, acting as a guide while navigating various systems, and advocating for voice and choice. People in peer support roles are also expected to function as change agents toward organizational shifts emphasizing person-driven environments that are best equipped to help people move through and beyond formal systems to a full life based in communities of their choice.

¹ Research relevant to peer support in mental health recovery <http://www.psresources.info/the-evidence>
Research relevant to peer support in substance use recovery
<http://www.williamwhitepapers.com/blog/2016/06/peer-recovery-coaching-recent-evidence-reviews.html>

In order to realize the peer support role's maximum potential, what should organizations be careful to avoid?

Research tells us that limited understanding of the responsibilities, values and expertise of those working in peer support roles threatens the integrity and efficacy of peer support. Focusing strictly on mental health or substance use problems to the exclusion of the other (as if people lived “one issue” lives), also poses a threat and so Transcom strives to bring substance use and mental health advocacy together to increase the potential for success overall. Additional threats include:

- Employers who focus on the life experience of a job applicant as the sole or primary job qualifier (without evaluating other job-related skills),
- Minimizing the value of peer support roles to little more than a vehicle to share stories,
- Excluding individuals in peer support roles from having input into workplace policies and direction,
- Providing no opportunities for growth or advancement, and
- Failing to arrange for peer support workers to collaborate and have regular contact with each other and allowing workers to be isolated from their colleagues.

All these points should be considered in developing work environments where peer support roles are to become fully integrated and effective.

What about staff in non-peer positions who disclose personal recovery experience in the course of their work?

A staff person who discloses may be in any position at an organization including secretary, program director, clinician and or another role. As part of their work they see value in sharing their humanness with individuals receiving services and others in the organization, although their job duties and responsibilities are varied and include tasks that peer support workers do not do (e.g. assessments, clinical notes, etc.). Sharing personal information should always be voluntary and may happen frequently or rarely depending on a number of factors. Self-disclosure is probably not part of an employee's job description if they are not hired into a peer support role.

Does it matter if the person sharing is a peer support worker or not?

Yes, a worker's job title and role matter. It is true that personal disclosure by people in any role can be valuable and inspire hope. For someone using services, however, that worker's role in the organization sends a strong signal and can have a significant impact on their expectations, their level of trust, what they say or do, how they see themselves and how they build a relationship.

Fidelity to the peer support role and the mutuality or equality in the peer to peer relationship is shown to be significant in both engaging the person in services and activating the person in self-initiated efforts to promote wellness and recovery.

Organizations are using a powerful tool when they fill roles defined by the fact that workers have learned through experience, through peer support training and through the empathy of having “been there”. Peer support workers play an invaluable and unique role by being “in but not of” the system. A peer support worker's focus on what someone truly wants and how to support their voice to be heard

can be life-changing for anyone accustomed to having a provider team that expects certain goals and focuses on program requirements. Additionally, peer support workers can serve as change agents to help the program or organization as a whole to move forward. The inherent separation between a peer support worker's position and typical day-to-day requirements of other staff is essential to allowing the peer relationship to fulfill its potential as an empowering force for change.

Non-peer staff who disclose are building connections and help reinforce the idea that we are ALL human and all have ups and downs. They can help us grasp the fact people are all on one continuum rather than separated as "the fixers" and "the broken". Both peer support works and other staff who disclose their lived experiences help bridge the gap, and lead us to a future where we may not even remember such a division. For the moment, however, Transcom is committed to making a distinction between "peer support workers" and providers in other roles in order to ensure access to peer relationships that are based on equality, prioritize self-determination and are supported by ethical standards.

Doesn't keeping peer support workers from doing tasks like medication administration and distributing money devalue their role or suggest that peer support workers are not competent enough to do those tasks?

No, focusing their work is about respecting the ethics of peer support workers and valuing their unique role. Every day, we make choices about the jobs we're going to take.

Consider the following example: Someone taking a role as a chef does not mean that he does not have the skills to be a cashier or bookkeeper. Rather, it means that his role as "chef" is so valuable that to divide him between that and the tasks of other roles simply makes no sense. It takes away from what should be his primary focus, and almost inevitably damages his work in both obvious and not-so-obvious ways.

What if the budget doesn't allow for the hiring of peer support workers who don't pick up those other tasks?

In many ways, it is better to not have peer support workers than to devalue or co-opt the role. This is a new profession and will quickly become compromised or mistrusted if it is misused. If money is truly not available, then, until it is, consider helping to make peer support from other venues more accessible by ensuring that individuals have transportation to local Recovery Learning Communities, Peer Support Recovery Centers, to peer support groups and so on.

That said, there may be creative ways to re-allocate funds and hours. Consider involving individuals you serve in conversations about what supports are most valuable to them and how to find resources for improving access to peer support. And never stop asking "why" when looking at how you do something. Organizations can get caught thinking they HAVE TO do something just because they always have, and neglect to ask "why do we always do this in this same way?"

How should peer support workers be supervised?

It is essential that anyone working in a peer support role have a supervisor who has also been thoroughly trained in the responsibilities and values of that role. Many people have already been hired into positions with vague job descriptions and supervised by individuals unfamiliar with peer support.

As a result, individuals in peer support roles have commonly been asked to perform tasks that are inconsistent with their training and incompatible with the nature of the role. Furthermore, for those working in the mental health system, certain assigned job responsibilities are incompatible with the Certified Peer Specialist Code of Ethics. This has led to conflicts, both external between employer and employee and internal to the employee who must grapple with being asked to do things that feel inconsistent or unethical. Internal and external conflicts and inadequate supervision have contributed to high turnover rates.

As with any profession, having a supervisor who holds high regard for and is well informed about the work one is doing is critical to the success of that work. While others within an organization can provide useful administrative supervision, it is vital for someone in a peer support role to both work with others in that role and receive guidance specific to that role in order to strengthen a shared sense of professional purpose and identity. Ideally, a supervisor will themselves also have job experience working in a peer support role, as well as relevant life experiences requisite to that position. Transcom advocates that all workplaces provide trained supervisors, and be working toward the aforementioned ideal.

How should accountability and continuing education for peer support workers be addressed?

Personal experience in the world with a variety of challenges is invaluable when it comes to peer support relationships. Not everyone who has such personal experiences, however, provide effective peer support, as that is just one of several important qualities that is necessary to do this work well. Thus, it is essential that workplaces support access to initial and ongoing training. Those workplaces that attach incentives, such as increased pay, to completion of requisite trainings are often successful at communicating how much they value and support employees who, in turn, feel important to the organization and valued for the time they invest in their education.

Furthermore, while the certification process for both Peer Specialists and Recovery Coaches is rigorous, there is no training that negates the need for ongoing learning. Like other professional training programs, these offerings are meant to be accompanied by annual continuing education requirements that help build and grow expertise. Thus, Transcom advocates for DMH to implement a formal continuing education process and requirements for a specific number of continuing education credits each year.

How can equality and mutuality in peer-to-peer relationships be protected?

Transcom recognizes that establishing relationships of mutuality and equality is a standard practice in all peer support roles and that these values underlie the tasks and responsibilities stated earlier. Mutuality is defined as a focus on the relationship (instead of a one-person “fixer” working with a “broken” individual) and the belief that everyone involved can learn and grow as a result of connections with one another. Equality and respect requires that each person be open and strive to understand the other’s way of making sense of and being in the world, including variations that are generated by cultural differences. It also requires effort and attention toward building trauma-informed environments and reducing or avoiding power imbalances that may diminish self-determination or erode the trust that is so essential to peer-to-peer relationships.