

Transcom Appeal To Policy Leaders

June 30, 2017

There is both good and bad news about peer support in Massachusetts. The “good news” is that a multitude of peer support roles have proliferated throughout the substance use and mental health systems during the past several years. There is broad concern, however, that the role is not widely understood and is often not used as intended. This has compromised the integrity of the peer support role, the ability of people using services to derive the benefits of peer support and the potential for cost savings and system-wide quality improvements.

Since it began, one of Transcom’s priority goals is the “support, safeguarding, and expansion” of the emerging peer support role; one that is both powerful and fragile and often not understood. Transcom’s purpose in making this appeal is to promote a shared understanding of peer support and a strong commitment to protecting the valuable role of peer support worker.

Introduction to Transcom: Education and Advocacy for the Peer Support Workforce

- Transcom is a subcommittee of the Massachusetts State Mental Health Planning Council.
- It is a broad-based coalition of diverse stakeholders from the mental health and substance use fields who are committed to building consensus and strengthening recovery supports throughout the Commonwealth that are person-driven and sustainable.
- Transcom determined that establishing peer support roles and peer-operated programs as integrated and respected parts of the workforce is the most effective strategy for achieving these aims.
- Transcom has been instrumental in supporting the implementation of much of the peer support workforce that exists today throughout Massachusetts.
- This rapidly expanding workforce is now integrated into both public and private service settings, including clinical and other community-based services, peer-run services and inpatient care.

“Every day I have examples of people in recovery – to keep peer workers out of your agency’s workforce is to deprive both your staff and person using services the most concrete experience of hope.” Brad Day, Bay Cove, Assistant Program Director

Basic Concepts

Simply put, the peer support role is designed specifically for someone who has similar life and recovery experiences to the people they are engaged to support. This may include experience with mental health conditions, substance use or both.

The peer support workforce in Massachusetts includes people with specific training in the role and is inclusive of Certified Peer Specialists (CPSs), Recovery Coaches, Young Adult Peer Mentors and other paid or volunteer positions. Peer support workers go by different names in different settings but they all share a common commitment to leveraging the power of lived experience to help others from an empowered, strength-based perspective.

Most of the many individuals with both mental health and addiction recovery needs seek support and peer relationships within just one of those communities and systems. Transcom believes that people who might benefit from both perspectives should be free to initiate peer relationships of their choice, regardless of which culture or training the peer support is associated with.

Although there are differences in training and certification, history, culture, language and how the peer support roles are utilized in the mental health and substance use systems, there are similarities that are central to the role. It is those critical similarities that we will focus on.

The focus of the peer support role is creating a relationship between equals that is non-clinical and built around a partnership toward growth and recovery. Peer support strives for mutuality while acknowledging that there is an inherent power imbalance in relationships where one party is paid and the other is not. Peer support workers focus on building relationships that:

- Support individuals to further engage in cultures of recovery
- Respect mutuality, reciprocal exchange and the wisdom of lived experience
- Prioritize self-determination by the person using services
- Partner to overcome personal and environmental obstacles
- Facilitate connections to community resources
- Serve as a guide to navigate complicated systems
- Advocate for each individual's voice and choice
- Consider cultural context and the unique role of trauma in each person's experience
- Work as change agents for improving organizational and systemic policies, cultures and physical environments.

These peer support relationships have been shown to result in engagement and activation of people in their own recovery process. This personal engagement and activation is essential to the goal of individuals sustaining and advancing their own long-term recovery.

What Does A Peer Support Workforce Offer?

Organizations such as CMS and SAMHSA, among others, have identified peer delivered services as a valuable resource to those in recovery. If the peer workforce is not implemented with fidelity to the role, peer relationships cannot deliver the full range of human and economic value they are capable of producing.

- Peer support workers, including volunteers, are people with lived recovery experience who have been trained to help people with a similar experience (their peers) to gain hope, explore recovery and achieve life goals. Recovery Coaches offering peer support in the substance use system may also include individuals with family experience of recovery.
- Peer support workers are actively engaged in their own personal and family recovery and share real-world knowledge and experience with others who are on their own recovery path.
- People who use peer services find courage by learning from another person how they moved forward to create the life they want.
- The ability to have open, honest, judgement-free conversations is what engages peer support workers and people using services on a deeper level.
- Talking with another person who has had similar experiences and feelings can be the spark of hope that "change is possible". That spark, in turn, can inspire someone to take action toward positive life changes.
- Instead of focusing on clinical considerations and compliance, peer support workers share their real-world knowledge and experience and connect with individuals in a mutual and person-centered relationship. That person-to-person relationship empowers people using services to activate their personal assets and sustain recovery on their own.
- The peer support role is unique and exclusive to those with lived experience; it cannot be replicated in any other role. The value of peer support relationships is priceless.
- Regarding outcomes, research on peer support programs has shown that participation in these services yields improvement in psychiatric symptoms and decreased hospitalizations, expands social support networks, enhances functioning and decreases lengths of stays in hospitals and lowers costs overall.
- Transcom has learned much about the current status of the peer support workforce by gathering feedback from workers in both mental health and substance use systems.

Appeals to Policymakers and Funders

Attach contracts and funding to adherence to the following fidelity measures:

- Require that organizations recognize and adhere to job descriptions that are consistent with peer support relationships. Tasks should not include responsibilities that overlap with other roles and that promote a power imbalance between the worker and the person they are working with (e.g., representative payee and medication administration).
- Expect compensation for peer support workers to recognize specialized expertise, training and the level of independence and responsibility required of the role.
- In the substance use system, including Peer Recovery Support Centers, the work of Recovery Coaches and peer volunteers should be consistent with each Center's community-driven code of ethics.
- Job descriptions should be consistent with the CPS Code of Ethics for peer support workers and volunteers in the mental health system, including Recovery Learning Communities (RLCs).
- Individuals working in peer support roles should be supervised by someone who has (1) been trained to understand the tasks and the ethics of peer support through an approved program and (2) have experience working in peer support roles themselves or have completed training specifically for peer support supervisors.
- Promote and design inclusive work environments that ensure peer support roles are valued equally to all other roles, as evidenced by peer support roles having input into policies, procedures and other relevant aspects of the organization.
- Require continuing education specifically designed and approved as relevant to peer support roles in order to foster professional development and maintain state certifications.
- Invest in cross training for peer support workers in both mental health and substance use communities to increase awareness, familiarity and, ultimately, improve access to the distinct strengths of each training program and community.
- Support the number of peer support roles and the expansion of peer support into all relevant environments (e.g. community programs, residential services, hospitals, detox programs, emergency rooms, drug courts, etc.) as well as supervisory and coordination roles for individuals with higher levels of peer support experience.

Appeals to Providers:

- When people are seeking services during referral and intake, describe the role of peer support workers and offer peer support as an option.
- Compensate peer support roles comparable to the level of independence and responsibility of other workers, taking into account the worker's specialized expertise, experience and training.
- Provide all employees education and exposure to the values, skills and purpose of peer support.
- Ensure attention is given toward hiring a peer support workforce that has similar life and recovery experiences to the people they are engaged to support.
- Encourage individuals who need support for both mental health and substance use recovery to engage in peer relationships of their choice, regardless of what recovery culture or training the peer support worker is associated with.
- Develop and adhere to job descriptions that are consistent with the role.
- Endorse the definition of "peer" not as a label for one individual but as a "peer relationship" between people with similar or shared experiences who work together in partnership toward movement & growth.
- Provide opportunities for ongoing training outside the organization as well as within it, for peer support workers, their supervisors and for others that collaborate with peer support activities.
- Create expanded and sustainable opportunities for employment of peer support workers and a culture that values peer support through effective hiring, equitable pay, training and supervisory practices, as well as opportunities for upward mobility (e.g. peer supervisory positions).