

The Massachusetts Certified Peer Specialist (CPS) Training Program

F.A.Q.s

Frequently Asked Questions

What is a Certified Peer Specialist?



A Certified Peer Specialist (CPS) is a trained professional who shares their lived experience of mental health recovery, resilience and healing as a means to inspire hope, optimism and the courage to act. A CPS supports people to strengthen their own unique pathway in life in settings that include inpatient, emergency services, respite, community health and outreach services, prevention and Recovery Learning Communities (RLCs). By sharing their experience, strength and hope with people using services, mental health professionals, policy makers and others, CPSs can significantly impact peoples' beliefs about the capacity for all people to recover.

How does someone become a Certified Peer Specialist?

In Massachusetts, you become a Certified Peer Specialist when you complete the CPS training and pass the Certification exam.

What's the purpose of the program?

The primary purpose of the CPS program is to help build a peer support workforce in Massachusetts. The training is designed to enhance the tools used by people who already have experience in peer support and the mental health recovery movement. Students bring their lived experience to class and learn how to use their story and skills to assist people receiving services as well as service providers. CPSs are the evidence that recovery is real.

Who runs the CPS program?



The CPS program is run by The Transformation Center, a statewide non-profit organization governed and staffed by people in recovery. The CPS Oversight Board is responsible for advising the CPS Training Program Coordinator regarding all aspects of the program, including curriculum, training and testing processes, policy and procedures, program evaluation, and meeting the needs of the community.

Who teaches the CPS training?

The CPS training is run by The Transformation Center and taught primarily by CPSs. The Massachusetts CPS program is the only one in the country that is fully run by people with lived experience.

Who funds the CPS program?

The Massachusetts Department of Mental Health has funded the CPS program since it began. Commonwealth Corporation and others also contribute funds to run the CPS program.

Who is eligible to apply for the CPS training?

Applicants to the CPS Training Program need to:

- Have lived experience of a mental health condition or emotional distress or trauma resulting in significant life disruption.
- Have been active in their mental health recovery/wellness for at least 1 year.
- Be willing to share aspects of that experience as part of their work as a CPS.

In addition, applicants need to be 18 years old or older, have a High School Diploma or equivalent (GED, HiSET, etc) and live or work in Massachusetts.

How do I apply? What about the interview?

The application process includes an application, references, and a brief in-person interview. All the materials and information you need can be found on the CPS website <https://transformation-center.org/home/training/certified-peer-specialists/> or will be send to you after scheduling an interview. Your ability to follow these instructions is part of our evaluation of readiness for the CPS training. Summary of the application and interview steps:

- 1) Review “CPS Training Eligibility” and other information on the website
- 2) Assess your readiness for CPS Training using the “CPS Training Self-assessment”
- 3) Schedule an interview at the online CPS Portal before the posted deadline
- 4) Complete the “CPS Application” (link and PDF included in your interview confirmation email)
- 5) Obtain two “Letters of Recommendation”
- 6) Upload letters to the CPS Portal or bring them to your interview

Filling out the self-assessment can help you evaluate your readiness for this training. You don’t need to submit the self-assessment; it is for your information and will help you prepare for the interview.

The application process also includes obtaining two (2) letters of reference from people that have known you for more than a year. A friend, colleague, peer support coach, therapist, etc. can complete a reference, letters will not be accepted from family members. One reference must be from someone involved in peer support. The reference letters should uploaded to the CPS Portal or brought to your interview.

How long does the program take?

From Orientation Day to Exam Day, the program can take from four to ten weeks depending how often the class meets. The training is most often a combination of

single-day trainings and a 3-day retreat. The retreat provides an excellent opportunity to network and form lasting relationships with your classmates. The exam is given approximately 2 weeks after the last class.

Do you have to be at every class?

Each class includes three (3) different modules. Each module is important for your workforce development and preparation for the exam. Being late or completely missing four or more modules will disqualify you from completing the course and taking the exam. We do this to stay in step with National Certification Standards.

I've heard you have to do homework. Is this true?

Yes. Every class includes assignments. These are designed to give students experience with the material covered in class. Turning in homework will contribute to your overall class participation grade.

Do I have to stay overnight at the Retreat?

The retreat is a 3-day, 2-night event that includes three meals a day and overnight accommodations in a double room for all students. Staying overnight is NOT required, however it is strongly encouraged. Most CPS students have found the overnight retreat to be a valuable part of their training.

I feel uncomfortable sharing a room with a stranger. Is there anything I can do?

There is at least one full day of class before anyone shares a room at the retreat. By this time, people in the class are beginning to develop relationships with each other, which lessens the feeling of being with a “stranger.” Sometimes this reduces a student’s discomfort enough to have a roommate at the retreat and sometimes it does not. If difficulties about having a roommate stem from a physical or psychiatric condition, you’re entitled to the “reasonable accommodation” of a private room.

I need a “reasonable accommodation.” How do I get this?

Some “reasonable accommodations” under the Americans with Disabilities Act are available for people with physical or psychiatric conditions. Students have requested reasonable accommodations for both rooming needs at the retreat and for testing needs.

A reasonable accommodation must be requested in advance, and must be accompanied by a letter from your doctor stating that you need the specific accommodations due to your physical or psychiatric condition. Accommodations available for exams include having time-and-a-half (150% of the time limit) to complete the written part of the exam, the use of a scribe (due to hand or visual disabilities), etc.

If you have any questions about reasonable accommodations, please refer to the CPS Program Policy Manual available on our website.

How do I know if I'm ready for the CPS training?

There is a self-assessment form on The Transformation Center website that can help you determine how ready you are for the program. It includes recommendations for developing a strong foundation in peer support.

What things can help me feel more ready for the training?

Any activities that build a foundation in your personal recovery and in supporting others in their recovery can be helpful. Involvement in a local RLC, participation in a WRAP training, becoming a member of a peer support group, and reading about recovery can also support your readiness.

What's the exam like?

There is a written certification exam, which takes place approximately 2 weeks after the last class. You have 3 hours to complete the test. The questions require you to demonstrate knowledge of the different tools, strategies and concepts discussed in classes, as well as the ability to apply this knowledge to specific situations. There is a combination on True/False, multiple choice, and open response questions.

Is there extra support to help me study?

Students have found extra support from forming study groups with their classmates. There are also many CPSs working at RLCs who may be able to support students preparing for the exam. A workshop called, "Learning to Lean," is also offered as an optional support for students to prepare for the exam.

I haven't gone to school in over 15 years. Can I pass this exam?

Many CPS participants have not been in school for a while. We provide study tips at the beginning of the training and offer the workshop, "Learning to Learn", to help students create a study plan for the test. Keeping up to date with homework and assignments and working with other students has been very helpful to many students.

How many people pass the exam?

The passing rate varies class-to-class averaging around 85% - 97% and people have three opportunities to take the same exam. We understand that part of the work people do includes learning how to study, how to approach taking an exam, and finding additional strategies for handling test anxiety. Three opportunities give people time and support to continue learning these different skills, and many people who do not pass the exam the first time do go on to pass on the second or third try. Tutoring is available for those who do not pass their first exam.

Do I have to become certified to get a peer support job?

Not all peer jobs require Certification but some funding sources do require peer support to be provided by a CPS. Employers decide if they will require peer support workers to be certified. Often, a person will be hired before getting certified, with the expectation that the person will take the training and become certified within the first 6 months or first year of employment. Some employers increase a person's salary when they complete the CPS training and certification program.