

Our mission is to address the behavioral health workforce shortage and improve the nation's mental health with nationally certified peer specialists.

Widespread shortages of behavioral health providers across the country leave many Americans without access to needed services. This means that individuals often go without supports that could prevent the costliest outcomes like disability, hospitalization, incarceration, and homelessness.

Peer Support Specialists

A key piece of solving the workforce shortage is the expansion of peer support specialists. Peer support specialists are individuals with lived experience of mental health conditions and/or substance use disorders who use a combination of their lived experience, knowledge of systems and services, and formal training to support others in their recovery.

When working with individuals with mental health conditions, peers have been shown to reduce rates of hospitalizations and emergency department use, while improving quality of life, management of co-morbid health conditions, and engagement with services.

Over 30,000 peer specialists provide their services in the United States, resulting in dramatic cost savings to payers and systems. While peer support is Medicaid reimbursable in over 40 states, it has yet to expand to Medicare and the private sector due to inconsistencies in training and required experience for peer supporters across the U.S.

National Certification for Peer Support

Mental Health America (MHA) created the National Certified Peer Specialist (NCPS) certification to set a high, uniform standard of knowledge, training, and experience across the country. Building upon state certifications, it requires a minimum of 40 hours of formal training, 3,000 hours experience, and the ability to pass an examination based on standards set forth by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the International Association of Peer Supporters, and a Role Delineation Study conducted with the feedback of thousands of peers.

The U.S. must take steps to scale the NCPS to meet the nation's needs during the growing mental health and addiction crisis. With the health care industry increasingly focused on providing and reimbursing for services that prove their value in both cost and outcomes, the expansion of peer support is critical in expanding access to and improving care for the millions of Americans living with mental health conditions.



Peer support has been shown to improve mental health outcomes while reducing hospitalizations and overall costs of services.

- A peer support program in Pierce County, Washington reduced involuntary hospitalizations by 32% leading to a savings of \$1.99 million in one year.¹
- A Federally Qualified Health Center in Denver found that using peers saved \$2.28 for every dollar spent.²
- A New York-based peer support program for individuals transitioning from inpatient services back to the community resulted in a 47.1% decrease in total behavioral health costs.³
- A meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials on peer support demonstrated that peer support is more effective than usual care in reducing depression.⁴

1. Bergeson, S. (2011). Cost Effectiveness of Using Peers as Providers. OptumHealth.
2. Peers for Progress (2014). Global Evidence for Peer Support: Humanizing Health Care.
3. Optum. (2016). Peer Support Services Improve Clinical Outcomes by Fostering Recovery and Promoting Empowerment.
4. Pfeiffer, P., Heisler, M., Piette, J., Rogers, M., & Valenstein, M. (2010). Efficacy of peer support interventions for depression: A meta-analysis. *General Hospital Psychiatry*, 33(1), 29-36.



Mental Health America (MHA) – founded in 1909 – is the nation’s leading community-based nonprofit dedicated to promoting the overall mental health of all Americans, including prevention services for all, early identification and intervention for those at risk, and integrated care, services, and supports for those who need it, with recovery as the goal.

Policy Recommendations

1. Provide \$10 million to cover costs associated with training, internships, and advanced certification for peer support specialists.

High quality standardization requires training and certification. It is often inexpensive, but under current reimbursement rates for peer services, it can be challenging for peers to pay for certification themselves. Providing scholarships for peers to achieve advanced national certification would catalyze further expansion of peers into clinical settings.

- Add an additional \$10,000,000 to the total appropriations for HRSA’s Health Workforce program, with a provision: “Provided that \$10,000,000 of this amount shall be used to fund training, internships, and national certification for mental health and substance use peer support specialists with certifications for practicing in integrated health care settings.”

2. Provide \$10 million for regional Technical Assistance (TA) center(s) and health care system participation in TA on integrating peer support, with particular consideration for Alternative Payment Models (APM).

Technical assistance should be provided to ensure clinicians are prepared to work alongside peers in health systems and to capture outcomes, especially APM incentives, with peers.

- Add an additional \$10,000,000 to the total appropriations for SAMHSA’s Mental Health program, with a provision: “Provided that \$10,000,000 of this amount shall be used to fund a learning collaborative for interested health care systems on effective integration of nationally certified peer support specialists, with an emphasis on health care systems in alternative payment models.”

3. Provide \$10 million for research and evaluation associated with the cost-effectiveness of peers, particularly in APMs.

Ongoing evaluation on the impact of peers on targeted outcomes and total cost of care must be conducted. The effectiveness and cost-benefits of peers should be examined in a variety of settings including inpatient psychiatric units, emergency departments, and outpatient services. This will improve inclusion and expansion of peer support services.

- Add an additional \$10,000,000 to the total appropriations for the National Institute for Mental Health, with a provision: “Provided that \$10,000,000 of this amount shall be used to test and evaluate the effectiveness and cost-savings associated with integration of nationally certified peer support specialists in health care settings.”

Learn more

MHA believes that peer support is an essential part of addressing the behavioral health workforce shortage and improving the lives of Americans with mental health conditions. To learn more about peer support and how MHA is working to ensure peer support is available wherever and whenever people need it, visit www.CenterforPeerSupport.org.