

Issue Brief: Integrating Peer Support Workers in Interdisciplinary Care Teams

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WHAT ARE INTERDISCIPLINARY CARE TEAMS?

Members of interdisciplinary care teams (ICTs)* work collaboratively to meet patient needs.

ICTs manage care and services to avoid fragmentation, ensure access to appropriate and person-centered care, and provide a team approach to address clinical, social, and mental and substance use disorder needs.¹

ICTs may include medical and mental and substance use disorders health specialists, nurses, social workers, physician assistants, and nonclinical staff. In addition to providing advanced medical care, interdisciplinary teams offer care management, care coordination, health promotion, comprehensive transitional care, individual and family support, and referral to community and social supports.² A health plan care manager, another lead ICT team member, or multiple team members may be responsible for implementing and reviewing care plans.³

Teams use *person-centered* principles and recovery-oriented approaches. These approaches employ shared decision-making, culturally competent practices, and recognize that there are many pathways to recovery.⁴ Thus, team members accompany each individual as they strive for improved health, a self-directed life, and realization of their full potential.⁵

A successful person-centered and recovery-oriented team empowers individuals to participate in healthcare decisions.⁶ ICTs also improve overall health and reduce the cost of services.⁷

**This document is a technical assistance resource supported by BRSS TACS. This TA resource aligns with the priorities of the SAMHSA FY2019-2023 Strategic Plan to reduce opioid misuse, use disorder, overdose, and related health consequences, through the implementation of high quality, evidence-based prevention, treatment, and recovery support services and improve the supply of trained and culturally competent professionals and paraprofessionals to address the nation's mental and substance use disorder healthcare needs across the lifespan through the implementation of the comprehensive set of recommendations put forward by the Interdepartmental Serious Mental Illness Coordinating Committee. These priorities include improving treatment and recovery by improving access to, utilization of, and engagement and retention in prevention, treatment, and recovery support services, along with supporting the use of credentialed peer providers and other paraprofessionals as an integrated component of the comprehensive care provided by the primary and specialty care systems in order to prevent substance use disorder and to address the needs of individuals living with mental and substance use disorders and their families.*

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How Can Peer Support Workers Contribute to the Interdisciplinary Care Team?

Improve Engagement and Retention in Care

Peer support workers are cultural and recovery ambassadors. They use outreach and engagement to bridge the divide between healthcare providers and the people who providers struggle to engage and serve, such as individuals with serious mental illness and complex substance use disorders. As members of an integrated care team, peer support workers make contributions such as these:¹⁰

- providing health education to individuals and communities¹¹
- giving practical assistance to achieve and sustain complex health behaviors like those needed to manage serious mental illnesses and substance use disorders
- helping people develop mechanisms to cope with health-related stressors¹²
- advocating for people seeking services and teaching people to advocate for themselves¹³
- building relationships based on trust and mutual respect rather than expertise¹⁴

These and other peer-provided supports can be adapted to meet the needs of many populations across a variety of healthcare settings.¹⁵

Promote Recovery and Health Care

Peer support workers embody *person-centered principles* and *recovery-oriented approaches* for two reasons: they have lived experience and they frequently come from the communities they serve. These traits enable them to inspire peers by sharing personal stories, listening, and providing encouragement.

Because peer support workers are engaged with individuals outside of clinical settings, they have information to share with others on the care team. For example, a peer support worker can attest to an individual's ability to manage his or her own care and convey the nature and consequences of barriers that he or she may encounter within and outside of care settings. However, peer support workers are expected to follow confidentiality laws and rules and respect individual's rights for privacy.¹⁶

Peer support workers can also assist in the delivery of follow-up services and offer practical, social, and emotional support to those individuals who are taking steps to implement care plans and reach self-management goals.

Peer Support Workers

Peer support workers can be volunteers or paid employees with lived experience who are in recovery from serious mental illness or substance use disorders.^{8,9} Trained and certified to engage and support others who are on or considering a recovery journey, peer support workers have a variety of titles such as:

- Certified peer specialists
- Forensic peer specialists
- Peer bridgers
- Recovery coaches
- Peer navigators
- Family peer advocates (those working with children, parents, and other caregivers)

Organizational Readiness for the Inclusion of Peer Support Workers

Integration is combining parts to produce a unit greater than the sum of its parts. The first step in successfully integrating peer support workers is to ensure that all interdisciplinary team members and the organization commit to *person-centered principles* and *recovery-oriented approaches* to providing care.¹⁷ Preparing for—and then implementing—subsequent changes is a process, not a single event, and includes anticipating and addressing barriers while ensuring the sustainability of new approaches to care.



Organizational Readiness

Preparations for including peer support workers on interdisciplinary care teams involve an honest, transparent assessment of the organization's readiness.^{18,19} The organization and its members must share the values of teamwork and collaboration, be committed to peer integration, and have the capacity and skills to adopt new principles, framework, and practices. It is also important for each organization to develop an action plan that:

- includes the voice and presence of peers at all levels of planning;
- specifies each care team member's role and how members work together;
- identifies how peer support workers complement and expedite the team's priorities and outcomes (for example, access, continuity, coordination, and communication);
- provides policies and procedures that use person-first recovery language throughout; and
- stipulates how organizational personnel evaluate progress, and when applicable, how people using

Integrating Peers

The development of interdisciplinary care teams and the inclusion of peer support services signals a change in the approach to working with people with mental illness and substance use disorders. This change requires more than simply hiring peer support workers. It necessitates providing active and ongoing support in the following ways:

- The hiring process should ensure that peers both meet the skill requirements of job and fit well with the organization.²²
- The organization should clearly define peer workers' roles and responsibilities and distribute this information to relevant staff.²³
- Training could surpass standard peer certification requirements²⁴ to include programs such as Whole Health Action Management²⁵ and Motivational Interviewing techniques.²⁶
- Employers should provide regular, ongoing supervision of peer support workers.²⁷ When possible, other peer support workers should be given this supervisory responsibility.
- Organizations should choose individuals to act as *peer champions* within the organization to help promote peer support services and encourage frequent, ongoing staff communication.²⁸

Anticipating Barriers

Integrating peer support workers into an organization can be challenging and is likely to encounter the following obstacles:

- Underutilization and devaluation of peer services: To meet the challenge, organizations should offer multiple opportunities for staff to learn about peer services.²⁹
- Practitioner and staff reluctance to integrate peer support services: To aid integration, organizations should consider using phased implementation and regular outcome assessments.³⁰
- Incidences of *peer drift* may occur where peer support workers try to appease others and fit in to overly hierarchal clinical understandings of, and interactions with, the people they serve: Regular supervision can help identify and mitigate this trend.

Sustaining Change

Sustainable innovations are woven into organizational culture, policy, budgets, and day-to-day practices. To promote the sustainability of peer support workers, include these promising practices:

- Inclusive policies and procedures that promote a peer workforce and value peers' unique orientation and expertise.^{31,32}
- Ongoing funding supports for the compensation and continuing education of the peer workforce.³³
- Organizational feedback loops that include peer support workers.³⁴
- A culture that emphasizes a team approach to care delivery and recognizes how collaboration can contribute to high quality health outcomes.³⁵
- Program outcomes tracking to identify where a program excels and where the organization may need to make modifications.³⁶

NOTES

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