



The Georgia Model of Peer Support: An Informational Resource for Peer Support Specialists and Mental Health Providers

Introduction

This issue brief is designed to outline the philosophy, tenets, and competencies of the Georgia model of peer support, which is utilized by the Iowa Peer Support Training Academy. It is meant to be an informational resource to Peer Support Specialists and mental health providers interested in peer support training opportunities in Iowa.

Peer Support

Peer support services are provided by individuals in recovery from serious mental illness and delivered to others who also have mental illness. Peer support services have a core philosophy of mental health recovery with increased involvement in treatment, life planning, and decision-making by the individual served. The Iowa Peer Support Training Academy, established in 2006, trains individuals to become Peer Support Specialists serving the mental health system throughout Iowa.

Peer support is not meant to replace traditional mental health treatment and services. As part of the Iowa Peer Support Training Academy, Peer Support Specialists adhere to a strict scope of practice, as well as a Code of Ethics that guides their work. Peer Support Specialists function as part of the mental health professional team, often leading support groups, offering one-on-one support and advice, and staffing recovery centers. Peer Support Specialists are not trained or licensed to provide therapy or prescribe or give advice regarding medications.

Outlooks, Inc. works with the Iowa Department of Human Services to direct the Iowa Peer Support Training Academy. The Academy utilizes the expertise of the nationally recognized Georgia model, as well as that of Iowa individuals in recovery to deliver the peer support training program. People who attend the Training Academy complete a seven-day, 48 hour training, participate in hands on activities and assignments, and pass a written four hour test before earning the ability to be considered a graduate of the Academy and becoming a Peer Support Specialist.

The Georgia Model of Peer Support: Encouraging Mental Health Recovery

The Georgia model of peer support was developed by Larry Fricks and Ike Powell, of Appalachian Consulting Group, with the underlying philosophy that the individual with mental illness can recover, self-direct his or her recovery, and be empowered to use his or her lived experience to help others. Unlike other training models, the nationally-recognized Georgia model does not focus on mental health diagnoses or history, but rather, how to empower the individual to develop hope for his or her future. It builds on the strengths and lessons learned of people with lived experience, and the training enables them to share with peers how they have worked to recover from mental illness. Additionally, tools on recovery dialogues, planning, and processes, among other topics, are discussed and incorporated into interactive classroom activities to train the future Peer Support Specialist.

In many communities, recovery has been defined as the process of gaining something lost. The Georgia model is a catalyst for mental health recovery, as it empowers people to take personal responsibility for their own process and encourage it in others. Often, as participants engage in activities and discussion, their own recovery journeys are strengthened, and they gain confidence in the lived experience they have gained.



At a recent convening of state mental health representatives at the Pillars of Peer Support Services Summit, state systems were brought together for a national forum to discuss the levels of support needed to fully implement peer support successfully. Among the suggestions were two recommendations related to training and testing, which the Georgia model fulfills:

- “There is a skills-based recovery and whole health training program which articulates the values, philosophies, and standards of peer support services and provides the competencies, including cultural competencies and trauma informed care, for peer specialist duties.”
- “There is a competencies-based testing process that accurately measures the degree to which participants have mastered the competencies outlined in the job description.”¹

In August 2007, using Georgia as a model, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services issued their guidelines for Medicaid reimbursable peer support services. Appalachian Consulting Group has the resources, experience and approval of both SAMSHA and NASMHPD to provide a wide range of technical assistance to states that are interested in creating a workforce of people in recovery to provide unique peer support services within the state mental health system and the infrastructure and long-term funding to ensure the success of the program.

Georgia Model Competencies and Iowa Training

The Iowa Peer Support Training incorporates the following competencies of the Georgia model of peer support. Additionally, the 2010 Training Academy will include training in peer support whole health, an innovative approach to the integration of mental health and physical health goals. Peer support whole health aims to increase the life expectancy of people with mental illness, who experience an average death age that is 25 years younger than the general population. Training Academy participants are also trained in the Iowa mental health system, cultural competency, ethics, and other relevant topic areas in a follow-up training day. Graduates of the Iowa Peer Support Training Academy are supported by Outlooks through the dissemination of information and coordination of continuing education opportunities.

Through the Iowa Peer Support Training Academy, participants should gain:

1) An understanding of their job and the skills to do that job;

- Understand the basic structure of the Iowa mental health system and how it works
- Understand the Iowa job description and Iowa Peer Support Training Academy Code of Ethics
- Understand the meaning and role of peer support
- Understand the difference in treatment goals and recovery goals
- Be able to create and facilitate a variety of group activities that support and strengthen recovery
- Be able to complete the necessary documentation required by the state
- Be able to help a consumer combat negative self-talk, overcome fears, and solve problems
- Be able to help a consumer articulate, set and accomplish his or her goals
- Be able to teach other consumers to create their own Wellness Recovery Action Plan
- Be able to teach other consumers to advocate for the services that they want
- Be able to help a consumer create a Person Centered Plan

2) An understanding of the recovery process and how to use their own recovery story to help others

- Understand the five stages in the recovery process and what is helpful and not helpful at each stage
- Understand the role of peer support at each stage of the recovery process



- Understand the power of beliefs and values and how they support or work against recovery
- Understand the basic philosophy and principles of psychosocial rehabilitation
- Understand the basic definition and dynamics of recovery
- Be able to articulate what has been helpful and what has not been helpful in his or her own recovery
- Be able to identify beliefs and values a consumer holds that works against his or her recovery
- Be able to discern when and how much of their recovery story to share with whom

3) An understanding of and the ability to establish healing relationships

- Understand the dynamics of power, conflict and integrity in the workplace
- Understand the concept of 'seeking out common ground'
- Understand the meaning and importance of cultural competency
- Be able to ask open ended questions that relate a person to his or her inner wisdom
- Be able to personally deal with conflict and difficult interpersonal relations in the workplace
- Be able to demonstrate an ability to participate in 'healing communication'
- Be able to interact sensitively and effectively with people of other cultures

4) An understanding of the importance of and have the ability to take care of oneself

- Understand the dynamics of stress and burnout
- Understand the role and parts of the Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP)
- Be able to discuss his or her own tools for taking care of him or her self.

Code of Ethics

Like other professionals in the mental health field, Peer Support Specialists are expected to practice according to the values and expectations in the Iowa Peer Support Training Academy Code of Ethics. This document outlines expectations related to treating individuals with respect and dignity, privacy and confidentiality, and dual relationships, among others. A complete copy of the Code of Ethics can be found [here](#).

Conclusion

The Georgia model of peer support, utilized by the Iowa Peer Support Training Academy, is a nationally-recognized and renowned curriculum. It empowers Peer Support Specialists with the tools they need to encourage mental health recovery in others. For more information on the Iowa Peer Support Training Academy, contact Amelia Colwell at Outlooks at 515-243-2000 or by email at acolwell@sppg.com. Additional information can be found on the IPSTA website at http://www.sppg.com/peer_support/index.php.

References:

- ¹ Daniels, A., Grant, E., Filson, B., Powell, I., Fricks, L., Goodale, L. (Ed), Pillars of Peer Support: Transforming Mental Health Systems of Care Through Peer Support Services, www.pillarsofpeersupport.org; January, 2010.