



# IOWA Peer Support Training Academy

Peer Support: An Informational Tool for Mental Health Providers

## **What is Peer Support?**

A trend has emerged in the delivery and funding of mental health services during the last decade toward increased consumer involvement in treatment planning and decision-making. The 2003 President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health emphasized the philosophy of recovery, a person-centered approach focused on education, illness management, personal responsibility, self-advocacy, and empowerment. Peer support, which is a service delivered by individuals with life experience of mental illness, to others with lived experience, includes the use of the recovery experience of the peer support specialist as a tool to help the recipient of peer support. The service includes the sharing of experiential knowledge, skills, and social learning, and is increasingly viewed around the country as a valuable service for states to include in their array of community based mental health services. Peer support was included as 1 of the 10 fundamental components of recovery in a consensus statement that was recently released by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (Ault, 2006). 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 – A Valuable Resource in Mental Health Settings**

Peer support provides a unique opportunity in Iowa to bring a proven practice into mental health settings that are often burdened by professional shortages and difficult-to-serve populations. Peer support specialists in Iowa are trained in a recovery-based, empowerment model that embraces the strengths of the individual being served, and utilizes the expertise and unique perspective of the peer support specialist.

According to research, peer support improves symptoms, coping, social functioning, and medication adherence, and reduces hospitalizations and use of emergency and crisis services (Ault, 2006). Tennessee's Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities found that 88 percent of peer support recipients were less likely to go to a psychiatric hospital (nd). In Georgia, 84 percent of consumers receiving peer support services showed a reduction in the number of hospitalizations in a two-year timeframe (Fricks, nd). Larry Fricks, nationally recognized expert consultant and trainer in peer support and former Director of the Office of Consumer Relations in the Georgia Department of Human Resources, estimates that peer support can reduce the costs of traditional care by 50% in Medicaid recipients with schizophrenia, depression, and bipolar disorder (Ault, 2006).

However, 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.

## **Personal Experience**

"Our agency became interested in peer support about ten years ago. At that time, we had started a Transitional Living Program and noticed additional needs for supports that could be

provided through peer support. The value of having staff who can be role models for recovery has become increasingly apparent over time. Also, in our rural communities we saw a need to provide a safe, welcoming place for people to go where they can receive a variety of supports to help them in their recovery. We approached a variety of stakeholders within the communities we serve and they were interested and supportive of the peer support project, so we wrote and received a grant from Magellan Behavioral Health Care of Iowa to open The H.O.P.E. Center.”  
- Jennifer Herrington, Waubonsie Mental Health Center

“When I went through Intensive Psychiatric Rehabilitation (IPR), it was presented in a peer format, and that was what sparked my interest in peer support. Helping people and seeing a difference in their lives through being a peer support specialist has been a great benefit to me and has been very empowering. The more you can tell your recovery story, the more it helps people understand and fight stigma about mental illness.” - Jimmy Yeck, Peer Support Specialist, Council Bluffs

“When people don’t know about peer support services, I notice them talking about the need to talk to someone in addition to their therapist, and they want it to be someone they can trust with personal information. Peer support serves as a sounding board and a way for people to have greater accessibility to support. There is less shame involved in telling another person in recovery about things like thoughts of suicide. Here at Hillcrest, we can cater peer support services to the person; right now I am helping a person learn computer skills, since that is a part of the individual’s employment goals for the future. Peer support helps people realize that they can take responsibility for themselves and their own recovery, since they see others have done so.” ~Jessica Perry, Peer Support Specialist, Hillcrest Wellness Center

### **Peer Support in Iowa – A Growing Field**

In Iowa, peer support is gaining momentum as an evidence-based practice in assisting individuals to meet the goals established in their treatment or wellness recovery action plans. Peer support, although not available everywhere in the state, is an effective mode of service delivery and support. The first peer support programs in Iowa were established through a partnership with Magellan Health Services, Iowa’s behavioral health managed care contractor. Using Medicaid community reinvestment dollars, Magellan provides funding to several community mental health centers to implement peer support programs as well as to evaluate the effectiveness and cost of peer support services.

Peer support is a reimbursable service through Medicaid, and community mental health centers are able to renegotiate their current contracts with Magellan to include peer support services delivered by peer support specialists. In Iowa, peer support specialists work in community mental health centers, recovery centers, veterans’ service centers, workforce centers, and VA inpatient psychiatric units. Peer support services may be offered in an individual or group setting. In recent years, other states have utilized peer support specialists in inpatient units, hospital emergency rooms and other settings as an advocate and supportive person for the individual accessing care. It has also been suggested that peer support specialists be utilized within the criminal justice system to provide mental health supports.

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 consumers to deliver the peer support training program. People who attend the Training Academy complete a week-long training, participate in hands on activities and assignments, and pass a written test before earning the ability to be considered a graduate of the Academy and become a peer support specialist. To find out more about

establishing a peer support program in your community, contact the Iowa Peer Support Training Academy at 515-243-2000 or [acolwell@sppg.com](mailto:acolwell@sppg.com); or contact Steve Johnson or James Bremhorst at Magellan Health Services by email at [STJohnson@magellanhealth.com](mailto:STJohnson@magellanhealth.com) or [jwbremhorst@magellanhealth.com](mailto:jwbremhorst@magellanhealth.com) or by phone at 800-638-8820.

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