



IOWA Peer Support Training Academy

Peer Support: An Informational Tool for Persons in Recovery

What is 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 consumer involvement in treatment, life planning and decision-making. 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

The value of an empowering person-centered and recovery-centered approach to mental health is, in many ways, immeasurable. Benefits to a person receiving peer support services include enhanced involvement in his or her own recovery, and development of hope in his or her own future through someone with lived experience. Benefits to peer support specialists include the increased confidence that can grow from using his or her recovery story to help others and the satisfaction derived from helping another person to move toward his or her own recovery. The mental health system is positively impacted in a multitude of ways when it embraces the unique perspectives of people in recovery.

Undoubtedly, peer support has financial benefits in addition to its therapeutic advantages. Peer support services are community-based and offer proactive and preventative approaches to mental health. By fostering natural supports in a person's community, peer support services are designed to be offered as a stand alone service or to enhance an array of other services that an individual may receive. They have been proven to assist in decreasing the need for hospitalization, and other more intensive inpatient and outpatient services, which can be very costly. The result of decreased hospitalizations and other services can include decreased costs to the individual and the system, as well as enhanced personal growth, confidence and strengthening of an individual's recovery.

Personal Experience

"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

How Do I Find Out More?

If you are interested in receiving peer support services, contact your local mental health center and ask whether they have a peer support program. If so, ask how you can become involved. If not, tell the provider that you are interested in receiving these services and let them know about the technical assistance that Magellan Health Services, Iowa’s behavioral health managed care contractor, offers to providers interested in starting peer support programs. Peer support services are Medicaid-reimbursable, and community mental health centers are able to renegotiate their current contracts with Magellan to include peer support services to be delivered by trained peer support specialists.

Outlooks, Inc. works with the Iowa Department of Human Services to direct the Iowa Peer Support Training Academy. Iowa’s training program utilizes the expertise of local consumers as well as the nationally recognized Georgia model to facilitate the peer support training program. People who attend the Training Academy complete a week-long training, participate in hands on activities and assignments, and must pass a written test before earning the ability to be considered a graduate of the Academy and become a peer support specialist. Application to the Iowa Peer Support Training Academy typically happens each spring. If you are interested in becoming a peer support specialist or would like to learn more, contact Outlooks at 515-243-2000 or acolwell@sppg.com.

Expectations of a Peer Support Specialist

The Iowa Peer Support Training Academy, together with graduates of the training, has developed a Code of Ethics for peer support specialists in the state of Iowa. Ethical considerations for peer support specialists include practicing within their scope of expertise, respecting the privacy and confidentiality of the person served, using direct communication with other members of the mental health team, serving as an advocate for the person being served, and promoting self-determination, among others. Peer support specialists are expected to be part of a mental health team. This team can vary, depending on the setting in which specialists work. Peer support specialists have their own scope of practice, which is different from other mental health practitioners and professionals.

Settings Where Peer Support Specialists Work

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.

Training Opportunities for Peer Support Specialists

The Iowa Peer Support Training Academy provides continuing education opportunities for peer support specialists. Around the country, it has been viewed as very valuable for peer support specialists to receive Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) training. Next steps in Iowa include seeking ways to pursue WRAP training for graduates of the Academy. The IPSTA also provides information to attendees of the Training Academy about ongoing opportunities for training in the state of Iowa.