



2023 ISSUE BRIEF: Peer Support Services

Peer support is the mutually beneficial act of helping someone get into or stay in recovery from a mental health condition or substance use disorder. In most cases, peer support is provided by individuals that have personal lived experience with a mental health condition and/or substance use disorder, both adult- and youth- peer support specialists. These peers use their lived experience with MH/SUD conditions as expertise, along with education and training, to guide individuals newly in their recovery journey toward meeting their goals. Sometimes family members provide peer support to other families as family peer specialists.

Peer support occurs in various settings in the community, including at home and in schools, in forensic locations, and more recently in clinical settings like hospitals and clinics. It is a proven effective method to:

- Prevent emergency crisis and high levels of care such as hospitalization,
- Engage individuals in care who otherwise would not engage, and,
- Improve self- management of co-occurring mental and physical health conditions.

Peer support may be provided to someone before a clinical visit, concurrent with a clinician (for example, in a mobile crisis team) or between appointments as necessary, and is [evidence-based](#). However, many clinicians are still learning about the value of peer support and how to create a culture to retain peer support specialists through collaboration with this key workforce.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA) is the leading federal agency on peer support and recently created an [Office on Recovery](#) which worked with national stakeholders to develop model standards for [certification](#) of peer support. SAMHSA previously created [core competencies](#) for peer support workers and has been collaborating with other agencies to promote and fund peer support. The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) funds training and certification programs for peer support specialists through the Behavioral Health Workforce Education and Training (BHWET) program. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid (CMS) issued [2007 guidance](#) to Medicaid Directors recognizing peer support as a reimbursable service through Medicaid, and [2019 guidance](#) to Medicare Advantage plans encouraging the use of peer services as a non-opioid form of pain management.

Peer support can be a reimbursable service when it is provided by certified peer support specialists. Currently, certified peer specialists are reimbursable in Medicaid in 49 states, in the Veterans Health Administration, and in some private health plans including Beacon Health Option, Optum, Anthem, and Blue Cross Blue Shield Minnesota. Peer support specialists cannot bill Medicare directly, but recent guidance describes how peers can bill as auxiliary personnel to billing practitioners in integrated primary care. Pending legislation would further expand access to peer support in Medicare.

National dialogue around peer support has grown due to increased mental health needs during and after COVID. As policymakers invest in integrated care and workforce development, MHA strongly urges them to include universal coverage of peer support services for adolescents and adults. This could be achieved through the following policies that we encourage Congress to enact and the Administration to implement.

MHA asks Congress to:

- Add peer support services as a service under the Medicare program and allow community-based organizations to bill for these services.
- Authorize the Office on Recovery at SAMHSA.
- Direct the Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics to create a Standard Occupational Classification for peer support specialists.
- Clarify that crisis psychotherapy codes include engagement services by peer specialists for billing mobile crisis interventions in Medicare.
- Increase funding for behavioral health workforce programs which include peer support specialists and provide new funding for training clinicians to work with peer support specialists.

MHA asks the Administration to:

- Issue new Medicaid guidance on peer support services that addresses changes in the field with respect to supervision, certifying and employing people with criminal records, and specialized services for youth and other populations.
- Include a regulatory definition of peer support specialists in the Physician Fee Schedule rule and train the health workforce to incorporate peer specialists in practice in ways that honor the principles of peer support.
- Clarify in the Physician Fee Schedule rule how peer support specialists can bill for engagement and education services in primary care and within mobile crisis teams.
- Provide Medicaid guidance on billing for youth peer support services in school-based health centers including Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs).