

Peer Recovery Support Implementation Guide | Justice Settings

Introduction

Peer supporters, also referred to as peers or Peer Recovery Specialists (PRS), provide recovery support based on their own lived experience of substance use and/or mental health disorder and recovery.¹ Peers are a rapidly growing workforce in mental health and substance use recovery in the U.S.² and bring unique value in their ability to work across multiple settings, supporting a wide range of individuals.

The implementation of peer recovery support services can signify a notable change in the way an organization operates, resulting in both logistic and cultural challenges that are specific to the setting.³ This guide offers recommendations to address common challenges of peer implementation in justice settings such as jails, prisons, and recovery courts.

Much of peers' impact comes from sharing their lived experience with disorder(s), which, as with the experiences and characteristics of those they serve, are highly individualized. In all strategies for overcoming obstacles to effective implementation of peer support services, consideration should be made to avoid over-developing professional mandates and approaches, which can undermine peers' contributions.⁴ Thus, finding a collaborative and adaptable balance between the organization's needs and the peer's needs to do their best work is key to successful implementation.

For more information on the history, definition, and outcomes related to peer recovery services in mental health and substance use treatment settings, refer to the [Measuring Outcomes of Peer Recovery Support Services Literature Review](https://www.omni.org/peer-recovery-lit-review) at [omni.org/peer-recovery-lit-review](https://www.omni.org/peer-recovery-lit-review).

Individuals who have experienced substance use or mental health disorders are overrepresented within the justice system including detention, parole or probation, and other adjudication processes such as problem-solving courts.⁵ Similarly, peers who deliver services and identify as having lived experience with a disorder may also have experience with these aspects of the justice system.⁶ Thus, there is a call for peers who have such dual challenges to provide support services in the justice system.⁷

Including peer support services in justice system organizations makes sense for several reasons. First, individuals involved in the system experience many of the same challenges as those who are in recovery, such as homelessness, employment challenges, and a disorder diagnosis.⁸ Second, the justice system is typically undertrained to serve those who are experiencing disorders, especially when they are reentering the community from extended stays in detention facilities.⁹ Peers can provide valuable knowledge and support to help clients succeed; peers have survived their experience and inherently offer clients hope that they can also succeed.¹⁰

For people who are detained, peers and programs that employ peers provide support for issues ranging from emotional distress and addiction to practical and educational needs. In many cases, those in detention adopt peer support roles or may be trained as peers themselves.¹¹ Engaging in peer work can shape experiences of imprisonment,¹² as individuals experience enhanced feelings of community, reduced feelings of isolation and loneliness, and increased perception of social and emotional support.¹³

While the use of peers is becoming increasingly common in a variety of health care fields, it is still relatively rare in justice settings.¹⁴ In general, peer support in justice systems encompasses a range of different structures and approaches including training, facilitation, counselling, modelling, and helping.¹⁵

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CHALLENGES

Culture of Treatment Services in Justice Settings. Traditionally, “offender rehabilitation frameworks” view those detained as passive recipients of treatment being directed through a professional’s proposed course of action.¹¹ Because peers emphasize empowerment, autonomy, and collaboration, justice settings that do not easily incorporate recovery frameworks may dampen the ability of peers to be effective.¹³

Conflicting Policies and Peer Legitimacy. Organizations may have policies that prohibit peers from associating with people who are incarcerated,¹⁸ and probation or parole officers may be hesitant to accept peers as legitimate service providers. Ultimately peers working in justice settings who have uncomfortable or awkward interactions with officers feel restricted in their ability to meet with potential clients.¹⁹

Lack of Organizational Capacity. The implementation of peers may require a great deal of additional logistics, management, and supervision in justice settings to maintain order, health, and safety. Often the capacity and resources in these settings are strained, and the implementation of peers using best practices may simply not be feasible.¹⁸

Maintaining Confidentiality. A balance of confidentiality and disclosure is a core component of peer work.¹⁰ Breaches of confidentiality are much more significant in justice settings and may have serious consequences for both the person who is detained and the peer. Peer processes may work differently in justice settings than they do in others.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Capitalize on the Unique Justice System Context. To set peers up for success, organizations must consider carefully how the context will affect peer work and train staff accordingly.¹⁶ Peers should also consider integrating justice setting-specific processes to aid recovery work, such as opportunities for individuals to participate in prosocial activities and receive direct and immediate positive reinforcement for positive behaviors.¹⁷

2

Recruit, Select, and Assign Carefully. Attention should be paid to the selection and recruitment processes of peers in justice settings. Additionally, not all justice-involved individuals are a good fit for peer-delivered services.¹¹ Successful peers in justice settings will demonstrate a willingness and ability to positively influence the behavior of individuals who are detained,¹¹ which can also build trust and legitimacy with other staff.

3

Formally Support Peers. Mechanisms should be established to support peer workers and build capacity, ideally relying on supports outside of the justice system whenever possible. These might include: (1) official peer job descriptions to establish protocols early; (2) regular support sessions for peers with colleagues and/or staff from the peer's employing agency; and (4) established resources for immediate de-briefing after crisis situations.¹⁸

4

Build Trust Among Incarcerated Individuals, Peer Supporters, and Staff. Increased trust can prompt positive change in incarcerated individuals and support program engagement.¹⁹ Peer processes (e.g., building relationship, sharing experiences, etc.) create an environment whereby detained individuals can trust others and feel trusted.¹³ Increased trust among peers and staff can also support positive cultural shifts, including mitigating confidentiality concerns.

General Recommendations for Peer Implementation

- Incorporating peer supporter input into policies and procedures supports cultural change.²⁰
- Training staff on the benefits of the peer supporter role increases buy-in and understanding across the organization.²¹
- Addressing stigma associated with peer supporters mitigates other challenges.²²

To view the list of references, download electronic copies of this guide, and find other peer support resources, visit the **Peer Recovery Support Reports & Research** page of the Virginia SOR Support website at virginiasorsupport.org/peers. This guide was created by the OMNI Institute with support from the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health & Developmental Services and State Opioid Response grant funding. Contact sorrecovery@omni.org for more information.