

Certified peer specialist frequently asked questions (FAQ)

Background

Peer support is the process of giving and receiving non-clinical support to achieve long-term recovery from severe mental health and/or substance use challenges. This support is provided by people who have direct lived experience in behavioral health recovery and have been trained to assist others in initiating and maintaining long-term recovery and enhancing the quality of life for individuals and their families.

Peer support has been a Medicaid reimbursable service for mental health in Washington State since 2005. In 2019, substance use disorder peer services were added to the Medicaid state plan. The addition of substance use disorder (SUD) peer services expanded access to peer support and the population that could become Certified Peer Counselors (CPCs). The Washington State Health Care Authority trains individuals with lived experience to become CPCs.

In 2023, the Washington State Legislature passed 2SSB 5555. This legislation created the new profession of Certified Peer Specialist (CPS).

Intention

The legislature found that peers play a critical role along the behavioral health continuum of care, from outreach to treatment to recovery support. Peers deal in the currency of hope and motivation and are incredibly adept at supporting people with behavioral health challenges on their recovery journeys. Peers represent the only segment of the behavioral health workforce where there is not a shortage, but a surplus of willing workers.

CPCs are currently limited to providing peer services to Medicaid enrollees at licensed community behavioral health agencies as a billable service. Other insurance carriers do not reimburse for peer services. As a result, youth and adults with commercial insurance have no access to peer services. The legislature also found that peers who work in other settings, such as emergency departments and behavioral health urgent care, cannot bill insurance for their services.

Therefore, it is the intent of the legislature to address the behavioral health workforce crisis, expand access to peer services, eliminate financial barriers to professional credentialing, and honor the contributions of the peer profession by creating the profession of Certified Peer Specialists.

Benefit

The benefits of becoming credentialed through the Department of Health (DOH) as a Certified Peer Specialist include:

- Peers will only be able to bill insurance or Medicaid if they hold the DOH credential.
- Applying for any DOH credential requires a background check, which can give clients reassurance that the peer they work with has been vetted.
- Complaints against a credential holder can be investigated, and action can be taken against them if it is a clear violation of the law.
- Verification of the training and the supervised experience requirements confirm they are properly trained, and the requirements for continuing education ensure they are ongoing learners who are actively engaged with the profession and up to date on current practice standards.

Timeline of changes

- Beginning in early 2025, the Health Care Authority (HCA) will begin training individuals as Certified Peer Specialists

- Once the CPS training launches, the CPC trainings will end. This includes the Youth and Family Training and the Bridge training.
- The new curriculum will also qualify peers to work under a DOH registered agency affiliated counselor credential to provide peer services at licensed community behavioral health agencies through December 2026.
- Beginning in January of 2025, HCA will launch the Supervision of Peer Specialists training.
- Beginning July 1, 2025, any entity that uses Certified Peer Specialists as peer crisis responders, may only use peers who have completed Crisis Awareness and Communication in Peer Support training
 - This training is currently available for CPCs and priority is given to peers working as crisis responders
- Beginning July 1, 2025, the new profession of Certified Peer Specialist will be available through the Department of Health.
- Beginning July 1, 2025, the decision of a person practicing peer support services to become a Certified Peer Specialist is voluntary. A person may not use the title Certified Peer Specialist unless the person holds the Certified Peer Specialist credential from DOH.
- Beginning January 1, 2027, a person who engages in the practice of peer support services and who bills a health carrier or medical assistance or whose employer bills a health carrier or medical assistance for those services must hold an active credential as a Certified Peer Specialist or Certified Peer Specialist trainee.
- No later than January 1, 2027, a person who is registered as an agency-affiliated counselor who engages in the practice of peer support services and whose agency bills medical assistance for those services must hold a certificate as a Certified Peer Specialist or Certified Peer Specialist trainee.

New training requirements

Beginning early 2025, HCA will transition from training individuals to become Certified Peer Counselors and will begin training individuals to qualify as Certified Peer Specialists through the Department of Health.

What are the current requirements to qualify as a Certified Peer Counselor and how will that change with the new profession?

Currently, HCA trains approved applicants to qualify as Certified Peer Counselors who are:

- Individuals with lived experience in behavioral health recovery or the parent or guardian of a child with lived experience with behavioral health services and
- 18 years or older and
- In behavioral health recovery for at least one (1) year.
- The above requirements are not changing with the implementation of the new profession.

What are the current training requirements to qualify as a Certified Peer Counselor and how will that change for the new profession of Certified Peer Specialists?

- Complete the online prerequisite training
- Submit an application along with the prerequisite certificate of completion
- Successfully complete the Standard, Youth and Family, or Bridge Certified Peer Counselor training.
- Pass the state written and oral exam

In 2025, the length of the training will increase to 80 hours. The training will be available in the following formats.

- Hybrid with 40 hours in person (5 days) and 40 hours virtual (10 half days)
- Fully virtual (20 half days)

- Other training configurations will be implemented in the future.

Training may be provided days, evenings, and weekends.

There will be only one training. HCA will no longer offer the Youth and Family CPC training or the Bridge training.

Currently, CCAR Recovery Coaches have been able to take the Bridge training to become a CPC. CCAR Recovery Coaches will be required to complete the 80 hr. CPS training to become credentialed through DOH.

What will the requirements be if you have currently completed the 40-hour Certified Peer Counselor training?

To become a Certified Peer Specialist, a CPC must complete the Gap training. The Gap training will be provided through an online learning management system (LMS) with approximately 12-18 hours of seat time. CPCs can take this online training at their own pace. Once the online LMS training is completed, individuals will be required to complete a 6 hour live virtual training to ensure the new skills have been grasped by the participant. There will not be an exam following the Gap training. The LMS training has embedded knowledge checks throughout and at the end of the training that the participants must pass to complete the LMS training. Once requirements are met, the applicant will receive notification from the HCA that they qualify to become a Certified Peer Specialist through the Department of Health.

Process for completion:

- Complete the online LMS training
- Submit Gap LMS certificate of completion to HCA
- HCA will register participant for the 6-hr. virtual training
- Once participant has successfully completed the 6-hr. virtual training, HCA will send a letter of qualification to participant.

Supervision of Peer Supporters

The legislation requires HCA to create a training for Certified Peer Specialists providing supervision for Certified Peer Specialist trainees.

The Supervision of Peer Specialists training will be available beginning January 2025 to current CPCs and CPSs. Priority for the training will be given to CPCs or CPSs who are currently supervising peers or who are working toward meeting the joint supervision requirements established in legislation.

This training is currently going to be offered as a 2-day in person training that will result in a certificate of completion provided by HCA. There is no exam for this training.

Crisis training for Peer Specialists

The legislation requires HCA to offer a 40-hour specialized training course for individuals employed as peers who provide services to individuals who may be experiencing a behavioral health crisis.

Beginning July 1, 2025, any entity that uses Certified Peer Specialists as peer crisis responders, may only use peers who have completed this training.

Are there costs associated with the new trainings?

HCA provides training and testing for all peer related trainings at no cost to individuals or organizations. HCA does not cover travel related expenses for trainings.

Department of Health Certified Peer Specialist Credential

Is this new credential required to provide peer support?

No, this credential is voluntary but is required to bill for services through an insurance carrier or Medicaid. CPCs who hold an agency affiliated counselor credential may provide Medicaid reimbursable peer services through December 31, 2026. Beginning January 1, 2027, only CPSs will be able to bill Medicaid or any insurance carrier for peer services.

Credential overview

The new credential is structured in the following way:

Certified Peer Specialist trainee

- Required to have completed the 80-hour CPS training or the 40-hour CPC training and the new Gap training.
- Completed the Certified Peer Specialist Trainee application through the Department of Health.
- When the trainee credential is active, begin working as a peer specialist trainee to gain 1,000 hours under the supervision of an approved supervisor.

Certified Peer Specialist

- Completed the application and paid the fee through the DOH.
- Provide verification they have completed all training requirements and met the 1,000 experiential hours required.
 - Current CPCs can attest to meeting the requirements with experience obtained prior to the Peer Specialist credentials being available.

Certified Peer Specialist supervisor

- Has met the requirement of a CPS and holds an active credential.
- Completed the Supervision of Peer Specialists training through the HCA.
- Has completed at least 1,500 hours of work as a fully Certified Peer Specialist engaged in the practice of peer support services, with at least 500 hours attained through the joint supervision of peers in conjunction with another approved supervisor.
 - Hours can be met through attestation if supervision experience was obtained prior to the creation of the credential.

Will a person be disqualified from obtaining the DOH Credential for Certified Peer Specialists due to a criminal conviction?

There are no “disqualifying convictions” to obtain any DOH credential. Each application is reviewed independently on a case-by-case basis.

- There can be conditions or limitations put on a credential due to criminal convictions, so it isn't just a yes or no answer.
- Applications are reviewed by a Case Management Team (CMT) to look at the conviction history, applicant's explanation, and subsequent life changes.
- Peer Specialists have a special exemption in rule for all applicants around monitoring programs.

Cost

The fee for the new Certified Peer Specialist credential is capped at \$100 until 2030. The credential must be renewed every other year. The fee will be re-evaluated to assess the cost in 2030. There is not a fee for Certified Peer Specialist Trainee credential, and after the initial certification it can be renewed annually up to four times.

The initial certification and four renewals will give a Peer Specialist Trainee a total of five years to obtain their supervised experience.

Reciprocity

DOH has also developed requirements for peers coming from other states to obtain the Washington credential. The national standard for peers includes the requirement for lived experience with mental health or SUD counseling, or to be a parent or a legal guardian of a child that had that experience. There is, generally, at least a 40-hour training required and potentially some experience hours, but not always.

For individuals credentialed in another state, the department is proposing that applicants take two courses from HCA; the introductory course required prior to taking the main HCA training and the Gap training developed for individuals who have previously taken the Washington 40-hour training. This should align their training with the educational requirements for this state and provide information on Washington regulations that may be different from their previous state.

National and international certifications will allow the applicants to become credentialed without any additional requirements.

Continuing education

Peers are required to obtain 30 hours of Continuing Education (CE) every two years. These are broken down into peer-specific CE hours, law and ethics specific hours, and optional hours that the peer can use that may not be peer-specific but relate to behavioral health counseling or to coaching.

- DOH has developed a list of known CE providers.
- DOH list includes options for peer-specific CE and ones for mental health or SUD counseling,
- As part of the continuing education requirement, every six years the applicant must submit proof of successful completion of at least three hours of suicide prevention training and at least six hours of coursework in professional ethics and law.
- Two hours of professional ethics and law will be required annually to meet the 6-hour requirement over the six years (an approved list is provided by DOH)
- There are other specific CE requirements beyond what is required in statute. Some are specific to certain types of peers, such as supervisors, and others will apply to everyone.
- Two hours of health equity continuing education once every four years (An approved list is provided by DOH).
- One hour of telehealth training for anyone who will provide telehealth services (one-time training, online, DOH will provide the link).
- Six hours of supervisory CE for approved supervisors every two years.

For additional information:

- [Email the HCA peer support team](#)
- [Visit the HCA peer support webpage](#)
- [Visit the DOH peer support webpage](#)