

Certified Peer Support Specialist FAQ

Background

Peer support is the process of giving and receiving nonclinical support to achieve long-term recovery from 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 support 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 (HCA) trained 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 support specialist (CPSS).

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.

Certified peer counselors 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 support specialists.

Timeline of changes

Beginning in early 2025, HCA started training individuals in the Certified Peer Support Specialists training.

Once the Certified Peer Support Specialists training launches, the CPC trainings ended. 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.

In addition to the Certified Peer Support Specialist training, peers working as crisis responders will be required to complete the Crisis Awareness and Communication in Peers Support (CACPS) training by January 1, 2026.

This training is currently available for certified peer counselors and certified peer support specialists, and priority is given to peers working as crisis responders.

Training timeline

- January 1, 2025
 - HCA launches the Supervision of Peer Support Specialists training.
- July 1, 2025
 - The new profession of “certified peer support specialist” will be available through the Department of Health.
- July 1, 2025
 - The decision of a person practicing peer support services to become a certified peer support specialist is voluntary. A person may not use the title certified peer support specialist unless the person holds the certified peer support specialist credential from DOH.
- January 1, 2026
 - Any entity that uses certified peer support specialists as peer crisis responders, may only use peers who have completed Crisis Awareness and Communication in Peer Support training.
- 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 support specialist or certified peer support 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 credential of a certified peer support specialist or certified peer support specialist trainee.

New training requirements

In 2025, HCA started transitioning from training individuals to become certified peer counselors and began training individuals to qualify as certified peer support specialists through the Department of Health.

What were the previous requirements to qualify to train as a certified peer counselor and how have these changed with the new profession?

Up until January 1, 2025, HCA approved trainings for applicants 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.
- 18 years or older.
- In behavioral health recovery for at least one (1) year.

The above requirements have not changed with the implementation of the new profession. These are the same requirements to qualify for the certified peer support specialist training.

What is the current process to train as certified peer support specialists?

- Complete the online Certified Peer Support Specialist Pre-requisite training.
- Submit an application along with the pre-requisite training certificate of completion.
- Successfully complete the Certified Peer Support Specialist training.
- Pass the state exam.

In 2025, the length of the training increased 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.

There will be only one training. HCA will no longer offer the Youth and Family CPC training or the Bridge training. Previously, CCAR Recovery Coaches were able to take the Bridge training to become a CPC. CCAR Recovery Coaches will be required to complete the 80-hour Certified Peer Support Specialists training to become credentialed through DOH.

What will the educational requirements be if you have previously completed the 40-hour certified peer counselor training?

To complete the educational requirements to qualify as a certified peer support specialist or certified peer support specialist trainee a CPC must complete the Gap training. The “Gap certified peer specialist training for currently certified peers”, is provided through an online learning management system (LMS) with approximately 12-18 hours of seat time. The LMS training has embedded knowledge checks throughout and at the end of the training that the participants must pass to complete. There will not be an exam following the Gap training. CPCs can take this online training at their own pace. Once the training has been completed a certificate of completion will be generated by the learning system. This certificate will need to be submitted to the DOH to transition from a certified peer counselor credential to a certified peer support specialist credential.

Supervision of peer support specialists

The Supervision of Peer Support Specialists training has been available since January 2025 to current CPCs and certified peer support specialists. Priority for the training will be given to certified peer counselors or certified peer support specialists who are currently supervising peers or who are working toward meeting the joint supervision requirements established in legislation.

This training is currently offered as a 2-day, in-person training that will result in a certificate of completion provided by HCA. Other training formats may be available in the future. 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 January 1, 2026, any entity that uses certified peer support 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 (DOH) certified peer support 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 certified peer support specialists and certified peer support specialist trainees 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 support specialist trainee

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

Certified peer support specialist

- Completed the application and paid the fee through the DOH.
 - Provide verification that 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 Support Specialist credentials being available.

Certified peer support specialist supervisor

- Has met the requirement of a certified peer support specialists and holds an active credential.
- Has completed the Supervision of peer support specialists training through the HCA.
- Has completed at least 1,500 hours of work as a fully certified peer support 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.

Benefit

- The benefits of becoming credentialed through the Department of Health (DOH) as a certified peer support 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 the persons receiving peer support reassurance that the peer they work with has been vetted.
 - Complaints against a credential holder can be investigated, and action can be taken if it is a clear violation of the law.
 - Verification of the training and the supervised experience requirements confirm the peers 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.

Will a person be disqualified from obtaining the DOH credential for certified peer support 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 support specialists have a special exemption in rule for all applicants around monitoring programs.

Cost

The fee for the new certified peer support specialist credential is capped at \$100 until 2030. The credential must be renewed every other year. The fee will be reevaluated to assess the cost in 2030. There is not a fee for certified

peer support 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 support 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 substance use disorder, 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 requiring that applicants take two courses from HCA:

- The introductory course required prior to taking the main HCA training (Certified Peer Specialist Pre-requisite training)
- 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.

Certain 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 choose 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 of certified peer specialist trainees every two years.

For additional information:

[Email the HCA peer support team.](#)

[Visit the HCA peer support webpage.](#)

[Visit the DOH peer support webpage.](#)