

Peer support training and workforce development

Overview

Peer support pairs individuals in recovery with peer specialists who share their life experiences. Peer specialists work with youth, adults, and/or parents/guardians of children receiving behavioral health services.

Peer supporters draw upon their experiences to inspire individuals to find hope and make progress toward recovery through shared understanding, rapport, and empowerment. Peer supporters assist individuals in identifying goals and working towards meeting their goals, overcome barriers, build community and relationships, share resources, and build skills like self-advocacy.

Background

Washington State prides itself as one of the first 11 states to use Medicaid funding for peer support services and have trained individuals to qualify as certified peer counselors (CPCs) since 2005.

Initially, peer support services were authorized as a mental health benefit and the state was limited to training individuals to provide mental health peer services at licensed community behavioral health agencies. As of July 1, 2019, substance use disorder (SUD) peer services were added as a benefit under Medicaid State Plan. This change allows the Washington State Health Care Authority's Division of Behavioral Health and Recovery (HCA's DBHR) to also train people with SUD to qualify as certified peer counselors.

Future landscape

The Washington State Legislature enacted [2SSB 5555](#) in July of 2023 to create the profession of certified peer specialist. This bill requires HCA to enhance the training requirements from 40 hours to 80 hours and to create a supplemental training for current CPCs to become certified peer specialists. HCA was also tasked to create a training for peers to provide supervision to peers, create a employment database, and provide trainings for organizations to support the implementation of peer programs.

Peer specialist training

To be eligible to take the certified peer specialist training, a person must:

- Have personal lived experience in mental health or substance use recovery, or
- Be a parent or legal guardian of a child who has received behavioral health services, and
- Be well grounded in recovery for at least a year, and
- Be 18 years or older

To become a CPS, a person must:

1. Complete the online prerequisite course
2. Complete the online application and be approved
3. Complete and pass the HCA approved CPC training
4. Pass the oral and written exam
5. Apply through the Washington State Department of Health for credentialing.

The process to shift from CPC to a CPS:

- Complete the online GAP training course
- Complete the six-hour, live virtual training

For detailed information on the HCA certified peer counseling/specialist training, visit the [HCA peer support program webpage](#).

Beginning in 2025, HCA will offer the standard certified peer specialist 80-hour training in place of the current standard certified peer counselor and the youth and family 40-hour trainings. The curriculum is intended to train peers throughout the behavioral health system to include both mental health and substance use. Training topics covered include recovery principles, telling your story, trauma-informed peer support, ethics and boundaries, cultural competence, goal setting, and documentation. Certified peer specialist trainings will be provided in a hybrid (in-person and virtual) and in a virtual format.

Peers who have successfully completed the training requirements qualify to take the written and oral CPS state exams. Qualified applicants will receive a letter of qualification from the HCA peer support program. If applicable to their position, peers can apply for a DOH certified peer specialist credential.

Former CPCs can obtain their certified peer specialist training through the completion of the GAP training. The GAP training consists of content added to the enhanced curriculum. The training is completed through a learning management system (LMS) platform and a live-virtual training (synchronized) to practice skills covered in the online learning platform.

The CPC Bridge training that has been utilized to train [CCAR Recovery Coaches](#) to become Certified Peer Counselors will no longer be available after 2024.

Workforce development

HCA provides continuing education opportunities for CPCs/CPSSs, technical assistance for provider organizations, support for employed peer specialists, and an employment database.

Online continuing education

The HCA provides the online continuing education courses. Topics include:

- Trauma-Informed Approach
- Supportive housing
- Supported employment
- Documenting peer support
- Ethics and boundaries in peer support
- Enhancing cultural intelligence
- The power of peer support in crisis services
- The intersection of behavioral health and the law
- Overview of WRAP

These training opportunities are intended for CPCs and CPSSs. These are available for a general audience as well as agency leaders, staff, and supervisors. Information about these trainings can be found on the [HCA peer support webpage](#).

Crisis Awareness and Communication in Peer Support

This is an in-person 40-hour continuing education training for CPCs and CPSSs. Priority for enrollment is given to CPCs and CPSSs who work in crisis settings. Per 2SSB 5555, beginning July 1, 2025, any entity that uses CPCs or CPSSs as peer crisis responders, may only use CPCs or CPSSs who have completed this training.

Certified peer specialist supervisor training

The Supervision of Peer Supporters training is offered for certified peer specialists who are interested in becoming approved peer supervisors. This is an in-person two-day training written in partnership with peers in Washington State. Topics include:

- Trauma informed supervision and leadership
- Ethics and Boundaries
- Recovery and culture
- Onboarding and retention and more.

After completion of the training, they are qualified to apply with the DOH to become approved supervisors.

Operationalizing Peer Support

This technical assistance training is available to behavioral health agencies interested in providing peer services or who needs support with their current program. Operationalizing Peer Support (OPS) is offered at no cost to agencies. This technical assistance is tailored to the needs of each organization and may include topics like peer services implementation, hiring practices, supervision, or documentation. Visit the [OPS webpage](#) for more information.

Employment database

[Washington Peer Jobs](#) provides a centralized resource for individuals seeking employment in peer support and organizations seeking to hire CPCs and CPSSs. The database aims to enhance workforce development by promoting careers in peer support.

Support for employed peer supporters

[The Washington Peer Network](#) provides support for employed CPCs and CPSSs from other peer supporters. This is an online platform that provides support groups, trainings, networking, connection, and holds in person events across the state.

Numbers served

In SFY 2024, 2070 people were trained to become CPCs.

FY25 Budget

- Mental Health Block Grant: \$811,750

- Substance Use Block Grant: \$521,300
- General fund state: \$1,185,000
- General fund federal: \$1,539,000

For more information

Contact: HCADBHRInformation@hca.wa.gov

Amanda Major Polley, CPC

Peer Support Program Administrator