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## CORE COMPETENCIES FOR PEER SUPPORT WORKERS IN BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SETTINGS

### Source: SAMHSA

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has identified and drafted a description of the foundational and essential core competencies required by a range of peer workers within behavioral health services. Core competencies are the foundational and essential competencies required by all positions that provide peer support in behavioral health services. These competencies are common across a range of roles and environments. Peer roles in some settings or program models may require advanced or specialized competencies in addition to these core competencies.

### CATEGORY 1: ENGAGES PEERS<sup>1</sup> IN COLLABORATIVE AND CARING RELATIONSHIPS

- Initiates contact with peers
- Listens to peers with careful attention to the content and emotion being communicated
- Reaches out to engage peers across the whole continuum of the recovery process
- Demonstrates genuine acceptance and respect
- Demonstrates understanding of peers' experiences and feelings

### CATEGORY 2: PROVIDES SUPPORT

- Validates peers' experiences and feelings
- Encourages the exploration and pursuit of community roles
- Conveys hope to peers about their own recovery
- Celebrates peers' accomplishments
- Provides concrete assistance to help peers accomplish tasks and goals

### CATEGORY 3: SHARES LIVED EXPERIENCES OF RECOVERY

- Relates their own and others' personal recovery stories to peers to inspire hope
- Discusses ongoing personal efforts to enhance health, wellness, and recovery
- Recognizes when to share experiences and when to listen
- Describes personal recovery practices and helps peers discover recovery practices that work for them

### CATEGORY 4: PERSONALIZES PEER SUPPORT

- Understands his/her own personal values and culture and how these may contribute to biases, judgments and beliefs

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<sup>1</sup> Peers = consumers and/or family members and caretakers of consumers. For more information, see: <http://www.samhsa.gov/brss-tacs/core-competencies-peer-workers>

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## CATEGORY 4, CONT'D

- Appreciates and respects the cultural and spiritual beliefs and practices of peers and their families
- Recognizes and responds to the complexities and uniqueness of each peer's process of recovery
- Tailors services and support to meet the preferences and unique needs of peers and their families

## CATEGORY 5: RECOVERY PLANNING

- Assists and supports peers to set goals and to dream of future possibilities
- Proposes strategies to help a peer accomplish tasks or goals
- Supports peers to use decision-making strategies when choosing services and supports
- Helps peers to function as a member of their treatment/recovery support team
- Researches and identifies credible information and options on the Internet and through other resources

## CATEGORY 6: LINKS TO RESOURCES, SERVICES, AND SUPPORTS

- Develops and maintains up-to-date information about community resources and services, both indigenous and formal
- Assists peers to investigate, select, and use needed and desired resources and services, both indigenous and formal
- Helps peers to find and use health services and support
- Accompanies peers to community activities and appointments
- Participates in community activities with peers

## CATEGORY 7: TEACHES INFORMATION AND SKILLS RELATED TO HEALTH, WELLNESS, AND RECOVERY

- Educates peers about health, wellness, recovery and recovery supports
- Participates with peers in discovery or co-learning to enhance recovery experiences
- Coaches peers about how to access services and navigate systems of services
- Coaches peers in desired skills and strategies
- Educates family members and other supportive individuals about recovery and recovery supports
- Uses teaching strategies that match the preferences and needs of individual peers

## CATEGORY 8: HELPS PEERS TO MANAGE CRISES

- Recognizes signs of distress and threats to safety among peers and in their environments
- Provides reassurance to peers in distress
- Strives to create safe spaces when meeting with peers
- Takes action to address distress or a crisis by using knowledge of local resources and service and support preferences of individual peers

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- Assists peers in developing advance directives and other crisis prevention tools

## CATEGORY 9: COMMUNICATION

- Uses respectful, person-centered, recovery-oriented language in written and verbal interactions with peers, family members, community members, and others
- Uses active listening skills
- Clarifies their understanding of information when in doubt of the meaning
- Conveys their point of view when working with colleagues
- Documents information as required by program policies and procedures
- Follows laws and rules concerning confidentiality and respects others' rights for privacy

## CATEGORY 10: COLLABORATION AND TEAMWORK

- Works together with other colleagues to enhance the provision of services and supports
- Assertively engages providers from mental health services, addiction services, and physical medicine to meet the needs of peers
- Coordinates efforts with health care providers to enhance the health and wellness of peers
- Coordinates efforts with peers' family members and other natural supports
- Partners with community members and organizations to strengthen opportunities for peers
- Strives to resolve conflicts in relationships with peers and others in their support network

## CATEGORY 11: LEADERSHIP AND ADVOCACY

- Uses knowledge of relevant rights and laws (ADA, HIPAA, Olmstead, etc.) to ensure that peers' rights are respected
- Advocates for the needs and desires of peers in treatment team meetings, community services, living situations, and with family
- Uses knowledge of legal resources and advocacy organization to build an advocacy plan
- Participates in efforts to eliminate prejudice and discrimination of people who have behavioral health conditions and their families
- Educates colleagues about the process of recovery and the use of recovery support services
- Actively participates in efforts to improve the organization
- Maintains a positive reputation in peer/professional communities

## CATEGORY 12: GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

- Recognizes the limits of their knowledge and seeks assistance from others when needed
- Uses supervision (mentoring, reflection) effectively by monitoring self and relationships, preparing for meetings and engaging in problem-solving strategies with the supervisor (mentor, peer)
- Reflects and examines own personal motivations, judgments, and feelings that may be activated by the peer work, recognizing signs of distress, and knowing when to seek support
- Seeks opportunities to increase knowledge and skills of peer support

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## CORE PRINCIPLES AND VALUES OF PEER-PROVIDED SERVICES

In addition to identifying the core competencies for peer workers, SAMHSA has developed a list of principles or values that guide the way in which these competencies are to be performed by peer workers. All competencies are to be performed in a manner that aligns with the principles of recovery-orientation, person-centered, non-coercive, trauma-informed, and relationship-focused. These principles of peer support are a synthesis or summary of principles and values that have been described in various documents about peer support.

### RECOVERY-ORIENTED

- Peer support provides a hopeful framework for the person to envision a meaningful and purposeful life, recognizing that there are multiple pathways to recovery.

### PERSON-CENTERED

- Peer support is directed by the person participating in peer support service. Peer support is personalized to meet the specific hopes, needs and goals of an individual.

### NON-COERCIVE

- Peer support never involves force and participation in peer support is always voluntary.

### RELATIONSHIP-FOCUSED

- Peer support centers on the affiliation between peers. Characteristics of the relationship are: respectful, empathetic, and mutual.

### TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

- Peer support utilizes a strengths-based framework that emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety and creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment.

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## Source: CCSA

The Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA) has developed in-depth professional competencies and related tools for hiring, supervising, and evaluating different members of the substance abuse workforce. These Competencies include both technical and behavioral competencies required to perform effectively in various occupational roles throughout the substance abuse field. The Competencies also apply to allied professionals such as primary healthcare providers, enforcement officials, Elders, volunteers and social workers who interact with individuals who have substance abuse issues.

For the purposes of this guide, we have identified the competencies most aligned with the types of positions behavioral health peer support workers occupy, such as counseling, health promotion, support and outreach, and crisis management.

## BEHAVIORAL COMPETENCIES OF PEER SUPPORT WORKERS

Behavioral Competencies are the abilities, attitudes and values required to perform effectively in a job function or role. Behavioral Competencies are typically learned and developed through life experiences. They are the “how” of performing a job, and they complement Technical Competencies.

### ADAPTABILITY/FLEXIBILITY (proficiency level 3)<sup>2</sup>

- Willingly adjust one’s approach to meet the demands and needs of constantly changing conditions, situations and people and to work effectively in difficult or ambiguous situations.

### ANALYTICAL THINKING AND DECISION MAKING (proficiency level 2)

- Gather, synthesize and evaluate information to determine possible alternatives and outcomes and make well-informed, timely decisions. Includes critical thinking and reasoning.

### CLIENT-CENTERED CHANGE (proficiency level 3)

- Enhance, facilitate, support, empower, and otherwise increase client motivation for positive change. Positive change is achieved by involving the client actively in the change process and encouraging the client to take responsibility for the outcomes he or she achieves. Clients may be individuals, groups, communities and organizations.

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<sup>2</sup> Proficiency levels are defined as (1) introductory, (2) basic, (3) intermediate, and (4) advanced. More detailed descriptions of these proficiency levels and how they apply to each competency can be found at: <http://www.ccsa.ca/Resource%20Library/CCSA-Workforce-Behavioural-Competencies-Report-2014-en.pdf>

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## CLIENT SERVICE ORIENTATION (proficiency level 2)

- Provide service excellence to clients (which can include individuals, groups, communities and organizations). Includes making a commitment to serve clients and focusing one's efforts on discovering and meeting client needs within personal, professional and organizational capacities and boundaries.

## COLLABORATION AND NETWORK BUILDING (proficiency level 2-3)

- Identify and create informal and formal interdisciplinary networks and allied community groups to support the provision of client services and achievement of the organization's objectives. Clients include individuals, groups, organizations and communities.

## CONTINUOUS LEARNING (proficiency level 2-3)

- Identify and pursue learning opportunities to enhance one's professional performance and development and the effective delivery of high-quality programs and services.

## CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION (proficiency level 2-3)

- Use evidence-based practices in innovative and creative ways to initiate both effective new ways of working and advances in the understanding of the field of practice. Innovation and creativity are achieved in translating research into practice to optimize improvements in service delivery and professional practice.

## DEVELOPING OTHERS (proficiency level 2)

- Facilitate and motivate sustained learning and create learning opportunities and resources, as well as promote and respect others' needs for ownership of learning outcomes. Includes creation of a continuous learning environment that fosters positive growth in both work and public contexts among peers, clients, client families, communities and other groups (recipients).

## DIVERSITY AND CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS (proficiency level 3)

- Provide respectful, equitable and effective services to diverse populations, as defined by culture, age, gender, language, ethnicity, socio-economic status, legal status, health, ability, sexual orientation, type and mode of substance use, etc. Affirm and value the worth of all individuals, families, groups, and communities; and protect the dignity of all.

## EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION (proficiency level 3)

- Articulate both verbally and in writing across a range of technologies in a manner that builds trust, respect and credibility and that ensures the message is received and understood by the audience. Includes active listening skills (attending, being silent, summarizing, paraphrasing, questioning and empathizing) and congruent non-verbal communication.

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## ETHICAL CONDUCT AND PROFESSIONALISM (proficiency level 2)

- Provide professional services according to the principles and values of integrity, competence, responsibility, respect and trust to safeguard both self and others. Includes the development of professionalism and ethical behavior in self and others (individuals, groups, organizations, communities).

## INTERPERSONAL RAPPORT/SAVVY (proficiency level 3)

- Establish and maintain relationships based on mutual respect and trust, appropriate sensitivity and transparency, empathy, and compassion with clients, colleagues, professional associates and the greater community. Encompasses skills of tact, diplomacy, and sensitivity in all encounters with others.

## PLANNING AND ORGANIZING (proficiency level 2-3)

- Identify and prioritize tasks, develop and implement plans, evaluate outcomes, and adjust activities in order to achieve objectives.

## SELF CARE (proficiency level 2-3)

- Deliberately and continuously apply professional and personal self care principles to oneself and, at times, others to sustain optimal productivity while maintaining physical, mental, spiritual and emotional health.

## SELF MANAGEMENT (proficiency level 2)

- Appropriately manage one's own emotions and strong feelings; maintain a calm and tactful composure under a broad range of challenging circumstances; and think clearly and stay focused under pressure. Encompasses self-regulation and mindfulness.

## SELF MOTIVATION AND DRIVE (proficiency level 2-3)

- Remain motivated and focused on a goal until the best possible results are achieved, with both passion for making a difference in the substance abuse field and persistence despite confronting obstacles, resistance and setbacks.

## TEAMWORK AND COOPERATION (proficiency level 2)

- Work cooperatively and productively with others within and across organizational units to achieve common goals; demonstrate respect, cooperation, collaboration, and consensus-building.

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## TECHNICAL COMPETENCIES OF PEER SUPPORT WORKERS

Technical competencies are the knowledge and abilities required when applying specific technical principles and information in a job function or role. Technical Competencies are usually learned in an educational environment or on the job. They are the “what” of a job. Counseling is one example of a technical competency. We have adapted several of the Technical Competencies identified by CCSA to better comport with the knowledge and skills required of peer support workers in a mental health setting.

### UNDERSTANDING MENTAL ILLNESS (proficiency level 1-2)<sup>3</sup>

- Background or contextual knowledge of mental illness and common mental health disorders required to properly inform more specific aspects of a peer supporter’s work with a consumer and/or their families.

### UNDERSTANDING WELLNESS AND RECOVERY (proficiency level 2-3)

- Background or contextual knowledge of key recovery principles and concepts (as defined by SAMHSA) to properly inform more specific aspects of a peer supporter’s work with a consumer and/or their families.

### UNDERSTANDING CO-OCCURRING DISORDERS (proficiency level 1-2)

- Knowledge and skills required to properly inform more specific aspects of a peer supporter’s work with consumers with co-occurring substance use and mental illness, or substance use and mental health issues

### CASE MANAGEMENT (proficiency level 1-2)

- Facilitating a consumer’s movement within and between service providers. It includes maintaining accurate documentation, sharing client information appropriately and collaborating with other services providers. While many peer support workers do not perform all aspects of case management, it is important that they have a general understanding of how case management and coordination of care work.

### REFERRALS AND RESOURCE LINKAGE (proficiency level 1-2)

- Collaborating with mental health consumers and their family members, services and supports to identify and access the best available resources to meet peers’ needs.

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<sup>3</sup> Proficiency levels are defined as (1) introductory, (2) developing, (3) intermediate, and (4) advanced. More detailed descriptions of these proficiency levels and how they apply to each competency can be found at: <http://www.ccsa.ca/Resource%20Library/CCSA-Workforce-Technical-Competencies-Report-2014-en.pdf>

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## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT (proficiency level 2-3)

- Working together to identify community needs and resources, and to plan and support or guide collective action. This competency is especially important for outreach and prevention workers.

## INDIVIDUAL PEER COUNSELING AND SUPPORT (proficiency level 2-3)

- Applying a comprehensive range of evidence-informed peer support styles, techniques and methodologies aimed at improving the overall wellbeing of peers. This can include, but is not limited to, the use of Whole Health Action Management (WHAM) and Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) tools.

## CRISIS INTERVENTION (proficiency level 1-2)

- Recognizing and responding effectively when a mental health consumer or associated group or community is in an unstable, risky, dangerous or potentially dangerous situation and how to respond effectively and appropriately.

## FAMILY AND SOCIAL SUPPORT (proficiency level 1-2)

- Working with mental health consumers and individuals and groups most affected by the consumer's mental health challenges and most able to either support or undermine the consumer's treatment goals.

## GROUP FACILITATION (proficiency level 2-3)

- Using evidence-informed approaches to work effectively with mental health consumers in group settings

## OUTREACH (proficiency level 2-3)

- Designing and delivering peer support services in the community to a broad range of individuals, including those who might otherwise not seek or have access to those services, such as members of traditionally unserved and/or underserved communities (e.g., racial and ethnic minority populations, TAY, older adults, LGBTQ, recent immigrants, etc.).

## PREVENTION AND HEALTH PROMOTION (proficiency level 1-2)

- Engaging with mental health consumers, their families and their communities to encourage the adoption of knowledge, behaviors, values and attitudes that promote personal and community wellbeing.

## RECORD KEEPING AND DOCUMENTATION (proficiency level 1-2)

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- Creating and maintaining accurate, up-to-date, records that both capture pertinent information relevant to the consumer's recovery goals and comply with legal and ethical requirements, such as HIPAA and privacy best practices.

## INTAKE AND DATA COLLECTION (proficiency level 1-2)

- Capturing important data related to capture demographic information and peers' needs and goals; selecting and administering evidence-informed tools and methods to measure peers' recovery and related objectives and to inform the improvements to systems and services to improve outcomes.

## TRAUMA-INFORMED AND TRAUMA-SPECIFIC CARE (proficiency level 1-2)

- Interacting with peers to identify and consider the impact that overwhelmingly negative events have on functioning and the ability to cope, and then developing and delivering interventions that emphasize safety, choice and personal control.

## WELLNESS PLANNING (proficiency level 2-3)

- Collaboratively developing a recovery plan based on peers' individual needs and goals, ensuring that planned activities and resources reflect the peers' needs, strengths and objectives. The process also includes monitoring, evaluating, planning for future changes, and updating the recovery plan so that it reflects the individual's evolving needs and goals.

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