

INCREASING FORMALIZED PEER SUPPORT SERVICES IN THE CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM

Background

In Canada's contemporary mental health system, peer support is a common and essential service area that complements and enhances other mental health supports, programs, and interventions. Despite international research and some progress in recent years, formalized peer support is still underutilized and underfunded in Canada.

Peer support standouts

- Peer support decreases symptoms such as distress and reduces substance use.¹
- Peer support programs improve mental health and well-being, helping people feel better, more confident, and hopeful. They also expand social connections, help build social skills and improve people's quality of life.²
- Peer support provides care that is less costly than care provided by many other healthcare professionals and can reduce rehospitalization rates and days in inpatient programs.³

What is Peer Support?

In peer support, there are basically two people involved: A peer supporter and the person they support. They share a common experience, like a mental health, addiction or substance use issue and work together in the interest of recovery.

- Peer supporters are professionals who are trained to listen, share strategies, and help the peer they are supporting to problem-solve and build skills.
- Peer support workers offer emotional and practical support that their peers may not get from other providers, such as doctors or counsellors.
- Peer supporters accompany peers on their recovery path, supporting them in navigating the often-complex healthcare system, and offering unique insights other providers might not have.
- Peer support can be a formal mental health service on its own or provided alongside other services and can be a one-on-one service or offered as facilitated peer support groups. Today, you can find peer supporters in mental health organizations, on campuses, on care teams and crisis response teams, and in hospital Emergency Departments and on mental health in-patient units.

What the research says:

Extensive research shows that high-quality peer support is effective and offers significant benefits to people with mental health and substance use difficulties.⁴ It is also favoured by people who use mental health services. Find the research [here](#).

National Standards

Personal lived experience alone doesn't set a person up to be a peer supporter. You also need a set of specialized skills. A peer support worker must meet professional practice standards, have special training, and be supervised and paid for their work.

Formalized peer support is mental health and substance use health care provided by people with lived experience who are trained to give this support.

Canada has extensive national training guidelines and certification standards for formalized peer support workers.⁵ Peer supporters must meet rigorous standards to become nationally certified by Peer Support Canada.⁶



Peer support is a crucial service

Early Intervention and Crisis Prevention:

Individuals with mental health or substance use struggles frequently experience long wait times for clinical services from doctors, counsellors and social workers, which can make their issues worse. Peer support can be a bridge to other supports and services.⁷

Peer support complements clinical services:

Formalized peer support works in conjunction with other services offered in community organizations, hospital in-patient units, emergency departments, mobile crisis teams, case management, and assertive community treatment teams, as well as post-secondary institutions and the workplace.

Many mental healthcare professionals (clinicians) report positive and productive working relationships with peer support workers.⁸ Clinicians appreciate consulting with peer teams and see peer support as a necessary service that allows people to share their experiences and struggles, while helping them navigate the healthcare system.⁹

Cost-Benefit Analysis: On average, peer support has a 1:5 cost-to-benefit ratio, meaning that for every dollar invested in peer support, the system saves five dollars in return.¹⁰ It reduces the use and duration of more expensive and intensive interventions such as those in hospitals.¹¹ Peer support reduces hospital admissions because peer supporters are well-trained to provide effective emotional and social support sooner than other types of care.

What policy makers need to know:

Research shows that peer support, as delivered by formal peer support workers, is highly effective. See the research [here](#). Policy makers and funders must build peer support into Canada's mental health and addictions systems.

Although formalized peer support is a critical part of the mental health care system it is often undervalued, and underfunded.

Working together — peer supporters on clinical teams: Organizations that employ peer supporters need clear policies and procedures to clarify the roles and responsibilities of all team members. The development of these policies and procedures must include those who use peer support services and peer supporters themselves.

Funding for Peer Support: When peer supporters are paid fairly for their work, peer support gains the validity in the health care system that it deserves. It also ensures stable employment for peer supporters who can then provide consistent and dependable care to the people they support. It also helps peer supporters maintain their own health and well-being. Paying peer support workers fairly ensures that peer support is equitable and ethical. In addition, training plays a crucial role in developing skills and must be funded by employers.

Fair pay and training are essential for peer support.



”Home bases” for Peer Supporters:

Community mental health organizations can provide a “home base” for peer supporters and can offer training, skill development, mentorship, and knowledge sharing groups (“communities of practice”). These organizations help keep peer supporters up to date and reduce the isolation many peer support workers feel in their jobs. Community mental health organizations must continue to play these crucial roles and receive ongoing, permanent funding.

National Standards and Training: While Peer Support Canada offers national peer support certification, it is inaccessible to many would-be peer supporters due to cost. Affordable certification will ensure that high-quality peer support is widely available in Canadian communities. Additionally, a national, centralized hub for resources and training will ensure the quality and consistency of peer support work.

Supporting racialized and newcomer communities: Many people in racialized and newcomer communities in urban centres have trouble making connections to formal mental health systems. Trained peer support workers can reduce the obstacles. Peer support training that is culturally relevant, in multiple languages and financially accessible would allow peer support to expand into these communities.

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