

Supporting career pathways for peer support specialists in California



Delta Center California is an initiative that brings together behavioral health and primary care leaders to accelerate care improvement and integration through policy and practice change. One arm of this initiative, the State Roundtable, convenes state-wide behavioral health and primary care associations to support collaborative policy solutions.

OVERVIEW

Peer support specialists (PSS) play vital roles in mental health support and recovery. This brief presents the results of a survey examining the experiences, career pathways, and organizational challenges and supports encountered by PSS in California and provides recommendations for how legislators and organizational leaders can enhance their support to PSS. Further research is needed to explore solutions to the needs elevated in this brief.

BACKGROUND

CalMHSA defines a peer as someone who self-identifies as having experience with the process of recovery from a mental illness or substance use disorder, either themselves or as a parent, caregiver, or family member. Alongside a significant evidence base, most states have instituted peer certification in recognition of their critical role.

California recently enacted peer certification for examination and enforcement of professional standards to coincide with launch of the Medi-Cal Peer Support Services benefit. This is a crucial juncture for supporting peers as they become a unique provider type within Medi-Cal.

As a part of Delta Center California's State Roundtable, several associations and an expert in PSS developed and fielded the survey. The survey was geared toward current and former PSS, parent and family caregiver support specialists, PSS' supervisors and organizational leadership. The survey was fielded in English and in Spanish from August 2022 - January 2023 and received 271 responses.

Survey Respondent Demographics

- White (48%)
- Hispanic or Latino (36%)
- Black or African American (10%)
- Multiracial (4%)
- Asian (1%)
- American Indian or Alaska Native (1%)

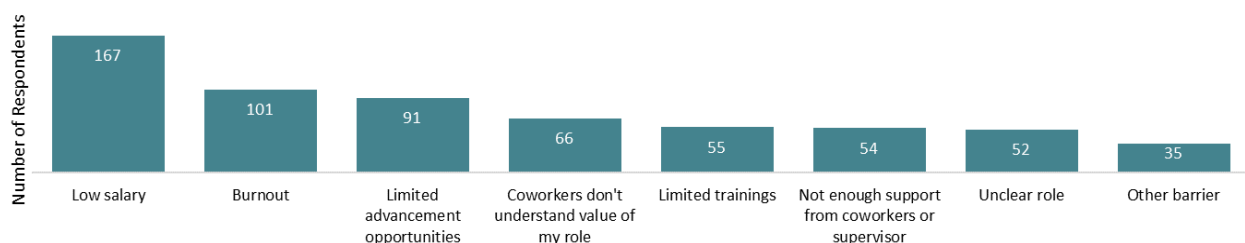


FINDINGS

Role clarity for peers is essential:

Respondents tended to agree that the PSS role is clear (e.g., there is a clear job description and responsibilities), with about 3 out of 4 either agreeing or strongly agreeing the role was clear. Still, respondents noted several challenges of PSS role clarity, including organizational leadership and colleagues not

Greatest Barriers at Work for Peer Support Specialists



understanding the value of peers and being warned not to step on others' toes in terms of the peer purview (e.g., case managers). This can prevent peers from working at the full scope of their role.

1 in 4 Peer support specialists disagree that they have advancement opportunities

Peers need advancement opportunities and career pathways: Regarding well-defined career paths for PSS, only about half of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that there were well-defined career paths at their current job, while 1 in 4 disagreed or strongly disagreed. Though about 3 out of 4 respondents felt that there were training opportunities available to peers, our data shows that the training was not leading to a commensurate degree of advancement.

Mentorship for peers is beneficial: Concerning access to mentors and mentorship for PSS, 1 in 5 respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they had access to mentors or mentorship. Many respondents elevated the importance of having a peer mentor at work, especially during their early months of employment. One peer shared how a mentor could have helped them gain confidence in their lived experience and to teach them to advocate for themselves in their new role.

Low salary is the biggest barrier for PSS: The vast majority (62%) of respondents agreed that low salary was a primary barrier for PSS. Other notable barriers include burnout (37%), limited advancement opportunities (34%) and coworkers not understanding the value of the PSS role (24%). One peer reported that many of their colleagues were forced to take a second job because they couldn't survive on the wages from their peer job. Another reported that they hadn't received a raise in a decade.



More role consistency, advancement/opportunity and access to certification and continuing education needs to be developed with peer specialists at the table.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our findings, we have identified a set of actions for legislators and organizational leaders to take in order to meet the needs of peer support specialists.

- Pay peers a **living & competitive wage**.
- Enable peers to work at the **full scope of their role**.
- Provide peers with **consistent, quality training**.
- **Provide ample advancement opportunities** to peers.
- **Develop leadership roles** for peers.
- **Address burnout** among peers.
- **Integrate peers into the workplace** by ensuring their colleagues understand the value they bring.
- **Clarify & standardize the role** description for peers.
- **Connect peers to peer mentors** to help them with career development.
- **Combat stigma & discrimination** against peers in the workplace.
- **Include peers in decision-making** for improvements that affect them.
- Support peers **in obtaining CalMHSA certification**.
- **Increase recruitment & retention** of BIPOC & LGBTQIA+ peers.