

An Examination of Becoming a Certified Peer Specialist

Emily A. Grant*, Crystal Reinhart, Ashlee-Keele-Lien, Nathan Swink, Scott Wituk,
Greg Meissen

Department of Psychology, Fairmount College

Abstract. Peer support between mental health consumers in the mental health system is not a new concept. However, the position of Certified Peer Specialist (CPS) is a recent addition to the mental health system. CPSs are people in recovery who are employed by the mental health system to provide support through sharing lived experience with those who are working on their recovery from mental illness. CPS services became Medicaid reimbursable in 2001. Since then, CPS programs have been implemented in several states. Each state has its own standardized training and certification process that CPSs complete. Kansas began having a Medicaid reimbursable CPS program in 2007. The first training session was held in September 2007, and five trainings have been held. More than 100 people have been trained to provide CPS services in Kansas.

The Center for Community Support & Research at Wichita State University has conducted interviews with those who attend the training. Interviews are completed during the initial training, and again 6 months and 12 months after the training. This poster will examine the responses to the interview questions regarding their experiences of being a CPS, their responsibilities and activities as a CPS, and their incorporation into the mental health system. It will also provide background information on the development and implementation of the CPS program in Kansas. Implications for CPS providers, mental health administrators, and researchers are provided.

1. Introduction

Peer support is a natural human response to any number of issues and circumstances. It is important for people to feel that they are not alone and that others are capable of understanding experiences and share common characteristics. Among those with mental illness, an important part of coping and recovery is the particular understanding and support provided by peers ([2], [4]). Peer support takes place when two or more people share a common problem or concern and together they provide emotional support to each other and develop ways to effectively manage the issue and personally grow (Davidson et al., 1999). Peer support is a reciprocal exchange based on respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement ([4]). Peer support is found in self help groups and self help organizations. Positive outcomes from peer support have been demonstrated for those dealing with bereavement, mental health, parenting, cancer, substance abuse issues and mental illness ([5],[6]). The Recovery Movement has revitalized the concept of peer support as an integral way to help people with mental illness. The values of peer support give consumers in recovery encouragement to share their recovery story with people who are beginning their own recovery journey. Many states have begun to implement training and certification processes for mental health consumers to become Certified Peer Specialists. The Kansas Certified Peer Specialist (CPS) program began in July 2007 and the first 40 CPSs were trained in September 2007. In Kansas and in 13 other states across the Nation, CPSs are entering into a new role that is being established in the already existing mental health care system. It is important to understand the activities and services of CPS services as they are becoming better known and are beginning to be seen as an essential component in the recovery process. Also, it is important to understand the background of the people who are being trained to be CPS. To date, research on these areas has not been conducted.

2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

Interviews have been conducted with those who attended the 5 day basic training sessions to become a CPS in Kansas. To date 116 people have participated in the CPS training. During the basic training, the trainees were asked to complete an interview. One hundred and eleven people chose to participate in the interviews (N=111). The face to face interviews focused on understanding the activities and services provided by CPS and the processes of becoming a CPS in Kansas. There was also as a thorough demographic section. The interview was developed by the CPS research team at Center for Community Support & Research. The participants were informed that they would be contacted again at 6 and 12 months post training to do follow up interviews (via telephone) to see if things had changed after completing the certification process.

Descriptive statistics will be used to analyze frequency of CPS activities and services provided and personal characteristics of the CPSs themselves. Characteristics include age, race, sex, education status, marital status, number of children, number of children under the age of 18, and previous employment at the mental health center.

3. Conclusions

Results will provide a very rich description of the people who are becoming Certified Peer Specialists in Kansas. The results will also show the frequency in which the standard CPS services and activities are being delivered by these CPSs in their mental health centers. This information will be useful to mental health centers who are considering adding peer support to their services offered. This preliminary research on understanding the basics of who is becoming a CPS and what the services and activities provided by CPSs are will set the foundation for future research on CPS in the mental health system.

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