

Hiring Guidelines for Peer Support Specialists

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Keep the following proficiencies in mind when hiring. Peer specialist applicants should:

- Believe that everyone can get into recovery
- Recognize there are many pathways to recovery
- Value choice and self-determination
- Have the ability to describe the peer specialist role in relation to both people receiving services and those providing services
- Value the peer role as a non-clinical position that augments traditional services but does not duplicate them
- Recognize the peer specialist role in relation to the peer and self-help movement
- Have the ability to advocate for consumers using respectful communication
- Recognize the importance of hope in the recovery process and motivation to change
- Have the ability to describe recovery through the use of personal story
- Have the ability to describe elements of a recovery-oriented mental health approach and describe approaches within the mental health system that hinder the recovery process

Advertising: Be clear about who you are looking for

- Past or present consumer of mental health services
- Must self-identify as a consumer of mental health services
- Must have personal experience with recovery

In the job posting, give a contact person, phone number, and email address rather than a fax number or address to send applications. This will give you the opportunity to briefly screen applicants, save time, and inform applicants without the lived experience qualification.

We'll post your job and inform peer specialists in your area about its availability!
Please send your job description, logo and job posting.

A Peer Specialist should bring added value to your organization. The interview process is a vital step in ensuring that the applicant is a good match to the needs of your organization. The questions below¹ may be helpful during interviews.

“Lived experience” with Psychiatric Diagnoses

HR staff may have concerns regarding asking about a person's lived experience due to ADA prohibitions against asking about a person's disability status. The interviewer can ask about the person's history when there is a “bona fide occupational qualification (BFOQ).” But even without this exception, there are a number of ways to explore this and learn helpful information:

¹ Some questions adapted from “Forum on Integrating Peer Services in Community and Inpatient Settings in Vermont's Mental Health System of Care” (Bluebird & Dixon).

- Can you tell me some ways you might use your personal lived experience to support the people you'd be working with? (*Answer may include ideas around inspiring hope, connecting with people from the place of shared experience, and/or the tools and strategies the person used to move to a better place in their recovery.*)
- Tell me about your personal background as it relates to this position. (*May include the value of bringing "lived experience" to the job.*)
- What is your experience with the public mental health system? (*In order to say, "been there, done that" the person needs more points of commonality with people using services than simply having received a diagnosis.*)
- Do you have any experience working with people who have been diagnosed with a mental health condition? (*May bring out volunteer work or other activities not highlighted on the application or resume.*)

Questions for Evaluating Peer Support Skills

- How would you define a peer specialist and how would you describe the key role or tasks of a peer specialist? (*Answer may include sharing mutual experience, supporting people in self-determination, inspiring hope, etc.*)
- Part of the role of a peer support specialist is to model recovery by sharing some of your own personal experiences. How would you go about doing this? (*Answer may include sharing appropriately, and telling a recovery story instead of an illness story*)
- What do you know about the concept of "recovery?" What is your personal knowledge of this and how did you come to this understanding? (*Answer should include mental health recovery, not just substance abuse recovery. Concept described may include the possibility for everyone to get into recovery.*)
- If you were working with someone who has become resigned to the idea that his or her life will always be limited because of a psychiatric condition, how would you try to support that person? (*Answer may include sharing tools, personal experiences and mutual feelings, but NOT telling the person that, "it will get better" or giving advice*)
- What skills will you bring to the job that will allow you to advocate for consumers while collaborating with other staff members? (*Answer may include using personal story to demonstrate the experience from the peer perspective, comments about respectful communication with everyone and an excellent response would include something about negotiating power and conflict*)
- Some staff here may be apprehensive or unsure about peer support. How would you deal with this?

- Peer specialists advocate for consumers during staff meetings and you may need to discuss with staff their approach to caring for consumers. Talk about your ability to speak up in difficult or intimidating situations.

Questions for Assessing Skills Related to the Work Environment

- Working with individuals experiencing severe and persistent mental illness sometimes presents situations that can feel disturbing or uncomfortable. How do you think you would handle these situations, both when they occur and after the situation has been resolved?
- What would you do if you felt your job was causing an increase in your stress level?
- Can you tell me about your history of dependability in prior job roles and/or other activities in your life? *(You can ask this. You cannot ask about history of hospitalization, history of taking medical leave, or when someone was “last sick.”*
- Do you prefer the independence to create your own work structure, or do you work better when a clear structure is presented to you?
- Have you ever experienced a conflict with a co-worker in the past? How did you handle it (or, if not, how do you think you would handle it?)
- Other peer specialists have said that the amount of social interaction in the job can be very draining. What are your thoughts about this?

Questions for a 90 day review after a peer specialist has been hired

- What’s working for you?
- What are your challenges?
- What are your concerns?
- What are your barriers?
- Who would you like to build a relationship with?
- How can I support you?
- What do you need?
- What questions do you have for me?
- Use the Rikert scale
- Use the Supervisor-Peer Specialist Reflection on Roles and Responsibilities