

Role Clarity in Peer Recovery Support Services: Navigating the Terms

In this rapidly growing and ever-evolving field of peer recovery support services (PRSS), language often carries different meanings depending on region, State, or a particular program. This can lead to misunderstandings or miscommunication. This document is designed to assist Targeted Capacity Expansion—Peer-to-Peer (TCE-PTP) grantees define and clarify key roles and terms that are part of the TCE-PTP grant project: peer leader, peer participant, peer leadership, and peer leader advisory councils.

Key Terms

Peer Leaders. Peer leaders are staff (paid, volunteer, or emerging) with lived experience of addiction and recovery and who are trained to offer and lead PRSS. Paid peer leaders are persons on staff who are paid for their time. Volunteer peer leaders donate their time to the PRSS program. Emerging peer leaders are persons who may be in early recovery or early in their training to become a peer supporter, or both.

Peer leaders support peer participants in a variety of ways: one-on-one coaching, mentoring, group facilitation, and other unique approaches that are central to the lived experience of recovery. Ideally, no perceived power differential exists between peer leaders and peer participants, but the training peer leaders receive differs by the primary role of the peer leader in the organization, such as mentoring, facilitation, and other tasks that peer leaders do. Training on the unique ethical code of conduct to which peer leaders adhere is a critical component of training. Table 1 presents some important factors that define and differentiate the role of a peer leader.

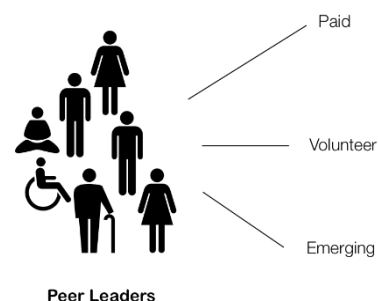


Table 1. Select Factors that Define Peer Leaders

Peer Leader Roles	Peer Leader Contexts	Role Implications
<p>Staff member: Part of a “home” organization staff, program, or recovery community organization (RCO)</p> <p>Supporter: Be of support to other peers after initial peer recovery support services (PRSS) training</p> <p>Leader: Move into leadership capacity and position through ongoing workforce development and supervision</p> <p>Educator: Use of experience-based knowledge to help others</p>	<p>Organization: Recovery coach, peer mentor, advisory or board member, community liaison, volunteer</p> <p>Program: Program design, coordinator, facilitator</p> <p>Workshop: Curriculum design, facilitator, educator, logistics</p> <p>Community: Event organizer, facilitator, convener, assessor, liaison</p>	<p>Role differential</p> <p>Partakes in initial training</p> <p>Shared lived experience and expertise</p> <p>Equal power and authority</p> <p>Shared challenges or intentions</p> <p>Shared goals, outcomes, beliefs, values and desires</p>

Table 2 contains an organizational checklist that may be helpful in peer leader development.

Table 2. Organizational Checklist: Developing Peer Leaders

Strategy	Peer Leader Staff	Peer Leader Volunteers	Emerging Peer Leaders
We have concrete strategies for recruiting peer leaders.			
We have specific requirements for potential peer leaders.			
We have clear recruiting messaging.			
We have a clear process for screening, interviewing, and matching peer leaders to tasks.			
We have job descriptions outlining each peer leader role.			
We provide a comprehensive orientation for each peer leader position, including ethical codes of conduct, policies, protocols, and initial training requirements.			
We have mutually signed agreements with all peer leaders including length of commitment.			
We provide specific training in addition to initial training for skills required in each peer leader role.			
We offer peer leaders encouragement and opportunities for networking and leadership.			
We have appropriate, established, and ongoing supervision for each peer leader.			
We celebrate and publicly acknowledge peer leader achievements.			
We have an established process for rewarding and/or compensating peer leaders.			
We have clear protocols on workload and self-care balance.			
We have risk management protocols for keeping the environment safe for peer leaders.			
We provide a user-friendly, welcoming, and inclusive environment for all peer leaders.			
We make organizational resources available to peer leaders.			
We provide regular and ongoing system navigation and support to peer leaders.			
We have an established workforce development program to promote “peer leadership career ladders”.			
We have a defined process to evaluate peer performance, outcomes, and achievement.			
We have peer leaders involved in all program and service planning through the participatory process.			
We have established protocols to receive and process feedback from peer leaders.			

Peer Participants. Peer participants are people who identify as persons in recovery and who take part in one or more PRSS offered by a program, such as one-on-one coaching, mentoring services, group services, and community events.

Peer Leadership. Peer leader and peer leadership are not interchangeable terms. *Peer leadership* within the TCE-PTP grant refers to the process of having *peer participants* who are receiving peer recovery support services engaged in the planning and implementation of a grantee’s PRSS programs

through peer leadership advisory councils. Table 3 presents some important factors that define peer leadership.

Table 3. Select Factors that Define Peer Leadership

Peer Leadership Tasks	Peer Leadership Contexts	Role Implications
Participate in programs	Workshops	Seeking recovery support
Participate in events	Programs/Services	Actively involved in programs/services
Participate in planning	Peer Leadership Advisory Councils	Provide input, feedback, to improve PRSS, and/or help to plan and implement new PRSS

Peer Leadership Councils. The TCE-PTP funding opportunity announcement states that peer leadership councils are a required deliverable. It requires grantees to “develop a peer leadership council to engage peers in program decision making” (SAMHSA, 2016). In other contexts, this is called a peer advisory council. Regardless of name, these councils are an integral part of the success of TCE-PTP projects.

Peers and Power Dynamics

The concept of power is an important one in peer practice. Peer-to-peer work is based on mutuality of lived experience of addiction and recovery, building trusting relationships, and sharing power with rather than having power over. When providing PRSS, peer leaders must be committed to sharing power with the participants.

Mead (2014) describes peer support as “intentional”, that is, as a relationship with a specific purpose in mind. She notes that power relationships are never totally equal, not even in peer relationships, and that what is important is to be aware of the dynamics. Several practices can help one pay proper attention to power in peer support:

- Name and negotiate power in relationships.
- Share risk and responsibility.
- Use experience to relate and build trust.
- Explore how we have “come to know what we know”.
- Open up new ways of listening.
- Stay curious, question assumptions, and own judgements and opinions.
- Approach crisis as an opportunity to grow.
- Pay attention to the impact of clinical and labeling language.
- Focus on the quality of relationships instead of fixing one another.

These practices also serve to help peers stay connected, co-learn, grow, and move toward what they want in their recovery.

More on Peer Leadership Councils: Whys and Hows

Because of their participatory nature, advisory councils are a benefit to any organization, nonprofit or for-profit, as well as to the council members themselves. Incorporating the peer participant voice is critical to the core values of PRSS, and forming an advisory council is an important step for organizations committed to peer development and leadership. Advisory councils—

- Provide a means for involving people who are willing to give assistance but have limited time.
- Provide an opportunity for those who would have been good candidates for the board of directors, but who are unable to serve in that capacity at this moment.
- Provide a way to keep key supporters and partners connected to the organization.
- Create a direct link to important shared lived, professional, and technical expertise.
- Energize members of the council to be ambassadors for the organization in the community.
- Recognize individuals for their committed service.

A natural by-product of these councils is greater support systems for the individual members, and the members share their gifts by providing their expertise, diverse perspectives, resources, and connections. Advisory councils can, therefore, establish a foundation for sustainable program and community leadership. Table 4 delineates several factors that define peer leadership councils as well as both member and organizational benefits.

Table 4. Select Factors that Define Peer Leadership Councils

Characteristics	Implications	Elements of Structure	Member Benefits	Organizational Benefits
Peer participants who have similar shared lived experience and expertise	Broader perspectives Broader vision Problem solving	Defined member role responsibility description Recruitment protocol	Converse with a group of trusted peer participants (and/or peer leaders/community partners) with similar experiences or vision	Reconnects the organization to clarity, creativity, and energy Effective way to accelerate success in programs and services
Peer participants interested in personal growth	Identification of shortcomings	Defined consultation interview	Obtain different perspectives on recovery, the organization's programs, services, challenges, and benefits	Reduces risks in time wasted and unsuccessful programming Invites the regular use of the participatory process
Peer participants interested in organizational development or vision	Programming and service ideas Event planning Advocacy opportunities	Defined purpose Feedback protocol Scheduled meetings	Accountability to assist the organizations in taking the right steps to enhance their programs and services	
Peer participants with different paths of recovery	Workforce development opportunity	Defined duration of meetings		
Peer participants in different stages of recovery	Personal growth			Gain different perspectives by helping overcome tunnel vision and

Peer participants with different skill sets		Defined facilitation: e.g., self-run, trained facilitator, rotating leadership, rotating membership	Identifies how a peer leader adds value to the organization	providing a broader perspective of issues
Peer participants with different roles in the organization			Peer leader uses his/her experience and insight to offer the organizational leadership practical advice	Organizational leaders are not doing it all
Peer participants with diverse cultural backgrounds			Ability to thrive in both personal and professional growth	

Structures for Peer Councils. Just as there are many pathways to recovery, a peer council can be structured in a number of ways, which means that grantees can design a council model that best fits its program. The common thread in all models is that involved peer participants (peer leadership) have an equal if not the authoritative voice. Three common models are described below.

Pure Peer Leadership Model. This model consists only of peer participants involved in programs and services. A peer leader may be involved to model facilitation until members feel comfortable in facilitating themselves. Benefits of this model include the feeling of safety, no power or role differential, and a sense of trust from the organizational leaders. Challenges may include lack of facilitation skills, confusion of process, and obtaining feedback.

Peer Leadership-Peer Leader Model. This model consists of a mix of both organizational peer leader staff and peer participants. Benefits of this model include shared knowledge, opportunity for staff to hear peer participants' perspectives in real time, minimal role differentials, and availability of trained facilitators. Challenges may include peer participants not fully revealing their perspectives in front of staff.

Community-Based Model. This model consists of peer participants, staff, and external community stakeholders and partners. Benefits of this model include broader and deeper knowledge of the peer participant perspective, shared expertise, and increased partnership relationships and professional expertise. Challenges of this model may include difficulty in finding a communal time and space, peer participants feeling inferior to experts, larger role and power differentials, and potential conflicts in vision.

Regardless of the structure, some simple practices can help in organizing a council. A checklist is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Organizational Checklist: Advisory Councils

	We have a defined Peer Leadership Council or Advisory Council model.
	We have a clear selection process.

	We have an established selection committee.
	We have a clear application and interview process.
	We have an established formal agreement for council members to sign.
	We have a designated person responsible for scheduling meetings.
	We have an established system to divide and share responsibilities.
	We have an established communication process.
	We have an established funding or budget (if applicable).
	We have an established facilitation system (i.e., rotating).
	We have established council goals and objectives.
	We have an established process to maintain goals and objectives.
	We have an established training and workforce development process.
	We have an established system for new membership.
	We have defined opportunities of participation in outside events and meetings.
	We have a clear feedback loop process.
	We have a clear process to ensure peer participant equal voice in the council.

Resources

Mead, S. (2014). *Intentional Peer Support: An Alternative Approach*. West Chesterfield, NH: Intentional Peer Support.

SAMHSA. (2016). Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Targeted Capacity Expansion-Peer-to-Peer (Initial Announcement), Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA) No. TI-16-008. Catalogue of Federal Domestic Assistance (CFDA) No.: 93.243