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Peer Professional Development and Career Path Brief

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Professional Development and Career Pathways

Introduction

Professional development is an important part of continuing career growth and meeting professional and personal goals for employees and provides benefits to employers as well.

Investments in professional development for peers can lead to strengthened skills, knowledge, pay increases and growth in confidence and pride in one's work.² Offering access to a multitude of career pathways for peers can support retention, engagement, and motivate employees to grow within an organization. Regional investments in professional development can ultimately lead to a higher skilled workforce, established pathways into other behavioral health fields, and improved services and outcomes for the region.

Key findings

1 There is limited upward mobility for peers.

There is broad acknowledgement across organizations (and amongst peers) that **there is limited upward mobility within the peer role itself; however, peers expressed that if they want to advance their career, the primary way for them to do so is to pursue a clinical role.** Within organizations in the region there are often opportunities for advancement into clinical positions, such as a Certified Alcohol and Drug Counselor (CADC) or a Qualified Mental Health Associate (QMHA). Some organizations offer peers the option to transition into other roles that are non-clinical (e.g., administrative roles or residential aid) but those aren't officially peer roles either.

Some employers expressed a strong "grow your own" culture within the organization, with encouragement and support to pursue additional education and training for more advanced positions. This support included flexibility in scheduling, providing mentorship, training in-house, and financial assistance with tuition.

Southern Oregon Peer Workforce Project Background

In 2022 the Center for Outcomes Research & Education (CORE) collaborated with interested parties in Southern Oregon on a project to develop collaborative recommendations to strengthen the peer workforce. The project aims to cultivate and support:

- Shared learning across peer programs
- Increased ability to advocate for funding and workforce improvements
- Strengthened capacity to evaluate what is working within and across peer programs

Project activities included:

- An initial evidence and data review
- Interviews and focus groups with peers and peer supervisors from a total of 14 agencies
- Consultation with peers, supervisors, and other BH/SUD leaders in So. OR

This brief on **Professional Development & Career Pathways** is one of several products from this project. The others are linked below and include:

1. An [Evidence Review](#) about the impact of peer programs and services.
2. A full [Project Report](#) and three additional briefs highlighting promising practices related to [Training & Certification](#), [Supervision & Support](#), and [Additional Priorities for Peer Services](#).
3. A [PowerPoint presentation](#) highlighting information from the project.

¹Parsons, L. (2022, August 23). Why is Professional Development Important? *Harvard Division of Continuing Education*. <https://professional.dce.harvard.edu/blog/why-is-professional-development-important/>

However, pursuing these types of roles are not available to all peers. Many clinical or advanced positions require more stringent background checks and requirements that some peers will not be able to meet because of their past experiences. Some peers expressed discouragement or “feeling stuck” if they did not want to, or had barriers to follow the clinical career pathway laid out for them by their organization.

“It is limiting because although they might be really good in that role, they're not gonna be able to pass the background check that's required for them to be in that role. And same goes with -we have a lot of preschool classrooms which is a certified childcare facility. You have to be able to pass a background check to be in those settings so they [peers] are kind of limited” – Peer Supervisor

BRIGHT SPOTS: Organizational support for upward mobility

- **OnTrack’s** On-PACE peer and counselor training program provides a paid apprenticeship and training opportunity for individuals to earn certifications as Peer Support Specialists, CADCs, and QMHAs.
- **Oasis** encourages their peers to seek additional training and is flexible with shifting their schedule depending on class schedules and requirement.

2 Organizations are increasingly recognizing the value of developing advanced peer positions and hiring peers as supervisors.

In recent years there has been significant growth in the number of lead peer positions and peers hired into supervisory roles; however, there is still potential for greater development in this area.

Just over half of the peer supervisors we interviewed said that they identified as a peer themselves

57% of peer supervisors identified as a peer themselves

(meaning they identified as someone with shared experience), although not all of them had worked as a peer prior to becoming a peer supervisor. There has been recent growth in the number and

types of advanced peer roles such as lead peers and peer coaches. Some advanced peer positions provide opportunities for increases in pay and responsibility for seasoned peers and supervisors noted that these can be ideal for peers that are interested in becoming a supervisor.

In addition to providing advanced peer roles, some organizations have been striving to provide competitive wages that are above average for the role so that peers can continue their career pathway while staying within peer work, instead of having to transition into a clinical role just to get a pay raise. We also heard from peer supervisors that organizations want to support their employees and help them pursue the career pathway that is most aligned with their own personal vision and goals for their future.

EXAMPLES OF ADVANCED PEER ROLES AT ORGANIZATIONS IN THE REGION

- Lead Peer
- Peer Coach
- Peer Manager
- Peer tiers/levels (e.g., Peer II, Peer III)
- Peer Trainers

“[The peer role] can be a stepping stone to be a CADC if that's the direction you want to go, and the [organization] supports us in that way too... But also, like opening up peer supervisor positions and peer manager positions and you know, really helping us to have career wages and competitive wages and stay within peer work.”—Peer Supervisor

“I think we're kind of like at this place where we're like go for it and we'll grow with you, you know. So as our peers want to develop in their own professional lives, we're keeping up with them because we have to create space for that if we wanna retain people and also it just brings a lot to the agency.”—Peer Supervisor

BRIGHT SPOTS: Advanced Peers Positions

- While more than half of the organizations we spoke to have peers in supervisor roles, **Colombia Care** has a peer *manager* position who is part of the organizational leadership team.

3 Peers want career pathway options that will allow them to advance their career while remaining in the peer role.

Peers expressed that they desire more opportunities for professional development while maintaining the peer perspective and role. Some peers don't want a different role because they value the horizontal, peer relationship they have with clients. Some clinical positions have role restrictions which differ from peer positions. For example, a peer shared that in their organization a CADAC wouldn't bring a client to an appointment; however, driving a client to an appointment can be an important part of the peer role because it allows for relationship building with clients. Peers expressed that they value the relationship building aspect of the peer work, and they want to be able to bring peer qualities along as they advance their career.

"For me, I like what I do, and I feel like I do have a lot of the experience piece of it because I went from being a person with an addiction to a person in recovery to an employee. I like what I do, and I don't ever want to be a CADAC. I don't have any desire to be a CADAC. I like what I do, I like being down here on the ground level with them and being able to be that support person that they can come to and relate to instead of this person that's on a pedestal."—Peer Employee

When peer employers encourage and offer multiple career pathways for peers to advance into 1) clinical roles, 2) supervision/management, or 3) advance within the peer role itself (tiers/leadership), they will be better positioned to fully leverage the valuable peer expertise and perspective at all levels of the agency and support staff retention and growth.

BRIGHT SPOTS: Organizational Opportunities for Peers to Grow in the Peer Role

- Addictions Recovery Center (ARC) provides a career path within peer work. They have opened peer supervisor and peer manager positions and provide competitive wages to encourage peers to remain in the peer role.
- Kairos has different level of peer tiers with increased pay grades at each level.

Recommendations

The following recommendations coincide with statements by peers and supervisors and were vetted by interested parties, including a peer community of practice and a behavioral health workforce workgroup (both located in So. OR). Recommendations are grouped at the organizational and regional levels and can be used to grow and strengthen the peer workforce in So. OR.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT & CAREER PATHWAYS

ORGANIZATIONAL BEST PRACTICES*	WHY IS IT NEEDED?
Increase opportunities for growth and leadership within the peer role that are aligned with individual peer's goals	Supervisors and peers both spoke to the benefits of having peers at all levels of the organization including at the leadership level. When organizations implement professional development practices it can also support retention.
Link peers to training or skill development for future roles as supervisors or managers.	As organizations increasingly prioritize hiring peer supervisors with peer experience, supporting current peers to take on leadership, coaching, mentorship, and light program coordination can be an effective onramp for a future supervisor position.

REGIONAL BEST PRACTICES*	WHY IS IT NEEDED?
<p>Consider the creation of regional standards for tiered peer roles with salary increases for each tier (e.g., Peer I, Peer II, Peer III, Lead Peer, Peer Supervisor or Manager)</p>	<p>By creating regional standards for stepped/tiered peer roles with salary increases for each tier, similar to CADC I, II, III tiers, a career pathway for peers can be created and will provide them the opportunity to remain in the peer role while still advancing their career.</p>

*Best practices elevated by peers and peer supervisors



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