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2-2023

Peer Supervision and Support Brief

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Recommended Citation

Fussell, Lizzie, "Peer Supervision and Support Brief" (2023). *Articles, Abstracts, and Reports*. 8560.
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Supervision & Support

Introduction

Peer supervision is a collaboration between a supervisor and a peer in which the supervisor provides support and guidance to promote effective and ethical peer delivered services. Supervision can strengthen motivation, problem-solving skills, aid the peer to gain additional knowledge and skills, and provide an opportunity to reflect on their practice. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA), all peers should have regular access to strength-based supervision, and this should be a high priority for early career peer workers.¹

Supervision for peers is particularly important because peers fill a relatively new and unique role on behavioral health teams.

Supervisors can be important advocates for their peers by helping to clarify peer roles and responsibilities for others in the organization that may be less familiar with the peer model, values, and culture. Supervisors can provide a safe environment for peers to debrief about their workday and can support peers by offering strategies and processes to deal with the challenging situations they may face.¹

Key findings

1 Peer supervision practices and standards vary widely across organizations in So. OR.

Peers and supervisors reported a wide range of supervision standards within their organizations, ranging from very casual to highly structured supervision practices. Not surprisingly, peers that reported more face time and trust with their supervisor also reported higher levels of confidence and satisfaction with their job overall. Most supervisors we interviewed said that their organization had supervisors meet with peers individually at least one time each month in addition to weekly or monthly clinical supervision and/or team meetings. Some organizations have agency-wide policies and procedures which help define expectations for supervision.

Southern Oregon Peer Workforce Project Background

In 2022 the Center for Outcomes Research & Education (CORE) collaborated with interested parties in Southern Oregon (So. OR) 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 **Supervision & Support** 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](#), [Professional Development & Career Pathways](#), and [Additional Priorities for Peer Services](#).
3. A [PowerPoint presentation](#) highlighting information from the project.

"[Me and] my supervisor we're in the same suite, so I can just-- She has an open-door policy. I can just come in anytime I need support and she's available, but she also gives me that freedom to do my work without being over me. Like, what were you doing during this time and that time... I feel really supported at my job."—Peer Employee

¹Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. *Supervision of Peer Workers* [PowerPoint slide]. https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/programs_campaigns/brss_tac/guidelines-peer-supervision-4-ppt-cp5.pdf

We also found that when organizations implemented a particular peer model (e.g., Prime+ model), they were more likely to have specific supervision requirements because these models frequently come with required standards of practice, including structured standards for supervision. Some organizations have supervision requirements despite implementing a particular model, and many supervisors shared how important it is for peers to receive all three types of supervision and particularly stressed the importance of having time for reflective supervision (see content to the right for more information).

Some peers we spoke to have no assigned, formal time to meet with their supervisor individually. In those instances, meetings with a supervisor happened on an as-needed basis and other team members often provided specific direction.

Many supervisors, regardless of the model being implemented at their organization described working to create a "culture of support" including an open-door policy and being available outside of formal supervision time. Peers expressed that they mostly feel supported by at least their direct supervisor although, some peers felt less support/confidence from the broader agency Administration/leadership.

Types of Supervision When Working with Peers

Reflective/Supportive Supervision generally concentrates on the employee's morale and satisfaction with the job/organization. Supervisors can provide encouragement and validation when practicing this type of supervision.¹

Clinical/Educational Supervision focuses on professional development of the employee via skills training, modeling, and structured learning experiences.¹

Administrative Supervision focuses on implementation of an organization's policies and procedures (e.g., work load, compliance, connection to payroll and/or HR, billing practices).¹

BRIGHT SPOTS for Organizational Supervision Standards

- **Kairos** has organizational wide policies and procedures for peer supervision with baseline minimums and integration of reflective strategies.
- **Family Nurturing Center** meets with peers for 1 hour of reflective individual supervision each week in addition to a team weekly meeting using the Sanctuary Model ([Sanctuary Model – Sanctuary Institute \(thesanctuaryinstitute.org\)](https://thesanctuaryinstitute.org)). They credit strong retention of their peers in part to this practice.

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The peer role is unique and requires supervision practices that acknowledge and support the full impact of a peer's day to day work.

The vulnerability that is required for the peer role, and inherent in the work, distinguishes it from other jobs. Supervisors and peers agree that a certain amount of empathy and support is needed when supervising peers. We also heard that supervisors should have a baseline understanding about the peer role, so they know when and how to provide the right kind of supervision that is necessary to fully support their employees.

"We talk as a senior management team about just like they [peers] are in the most vulnerable role in this agency because they don't just get to come to work and leave their personal life to the side. It's part of their job. It's part of what we're asking them to do."—Peer Supervisor

Additionally, the peer role has added layers of challenges from other careers and can include:

- Triggers which can impact the peer employee's own recovery and treatment
- Boundaries due to the role being very hands on

- Compassion fatigue because this role requires a great deal of support to clients and those in recovery themselves

The peer role is demanding, and there were frequent discussions of burnout during our conversations with both peers and supervisors. We heard that some organizations and supervisors are great at helping prevent burnout amongst their employees by offering dedicated self-care time, supporting peers to acknowledge and address vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue, and encouraging internal team building and peer to peer connections. On the other hand, some organizations that we spoke to acknowledged that they struggle with preventing burnout because there is a culture of “go, go, go” embedded in the work. If peers do not receive appropriate supervision and support to help them overcome these challenges, they may struggle to be successful in their role.

“Our approach has been pretty good with retention and client outcomes because the staff are not burning out, they're able to provide sustained attention and what peer service is all about -which is being there for the client. It's not about the help they need, it's the presence. If they have the wherewithal to do that, then that's all the client needs and that's easy to do in a sustainable way... And, you know, peers are people in recovery. So if they're stressed out, we're running a risk of losing the progress that they've made. So it is in the interest of the agency, for the clients, and for the staff - for us to prioritize their wellbeing. – Peer Supervisor

3 Peers and supervisors agree that there are specific organizational and supervision practices that are most effective to support peers.

There is broad consensus among peers and supervisors about the organizational and supervision practices that are “ideal” to fully support peers in their role; however, not all organizations have the infrastructure or existing staffing to implement these practices.

One practice that had broad agreement from peers and supervisors alike was that **supervisors who are peers themselves is ideal**, with some suggesting it should be a requirement. Ensuring that peers receive supervision from supervisors who are familiar with the peer role and scope of work, and who themselves have lived experience, is tremendously important for peers to feel fully supported in this role. The peer role requires vulnerability, can be incredibly challenging, and is emotionally draining, therefore peer supervisors need to have advanced knowledge about supervision types and practices that can support the peer role and its intricacies.

“I need to be a peer to supervise a peer... And then being familiar with like core competencies for peer work, knowing what peer work is, knowing the resources that are available, being familiar with the resources. And then being approachable and just being another member of my team, you know, managing with them, not above them, you know.”— Peer Supervisor

Another best practice that was mentioned was the utilization of **co-supervision models** (with at least one supervisor who identified as a peer), which can provide complimentary support to peers. Some organizations have added peer coaches or lead peers that can be additional supports to peers. Other organizations that have peers working across several different models/programs – often with a supervisor who themselves is *not* a peer – have added a peer manager or peer coordinator to support peers across multiple programs.

“The peer coach is an extra hat that she wears to coach her fellow peers. She does a lot of similar stuff to supervision - she checks in with each of the peers, she runs coaching hours where they would talk about the core competencies and anything that's coming up in relation to the peer work. She's also available for one-on-one coaching. So, it's really like having an extra supervisor... It feels like there's two folks that folks can go to for support.”—Peer Supervisor

Peers also mentioned that their **connection to coworkers and a sense of belonging** or “family” within their team provided additional support for them and was a big reason they were committed to their organization. There were many different strategies that we heard were being implemented within organizations across the region to provide support for peer employee well-being (and retention).

These practices include:

- Wage increases/bonuses
- Additional mental health days off
- Flexible scheduling
- 4-day work week
- Specific self-care/team building time built into the work week

BRIGHT SPOTS: Organizational Strategies to Support the Peer Role

- **Addictions Recovery Center** has moved to 4 day/32 hour work week (32 hours considered full time)
- **HIV Alliance** has a “Self-Care 1st” model
- **Jackson County Mental Health** offers accommodating and flexible schedules for peers that are interested in working fulltime or part-time
- **Kairos** supports an agency-wide coaching cohort to cultivate support between peers. They also utilize creative recognition strategies like Going Above and Beyond (GAB) awards and provide staff bonuses to help with staff retention
- **OnTrack** provides two mental health days for their employees

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Peer supervisors need ample onboarding and training themselves, along with organizational support, to be able to provide adequate supervision to employees.

To be able to successfully support peers, **peer supervisors also need organizational support including adequate supervision, specific (foundational) supervisory training and onboarding, and a reasonable workload to ensure that they have enough time to support peers.**

Supervisors in the region receive varying amounts of supervisory training, onboarding support and direction around how, and when, to deliver peer supervision leaving some supervisors feeling ill-equipped to do their job. Intentional infrastructure for peer supervision training and specific guidance for supervisory practices is needed for peer supervisors at the onset of the role and throughout the duration of their employment.

“I’ve been in this role for almost three years as a peer supervisor, so along the way I have gathered enough training that I feel more equipped now than I did when I first started, but it’s been a long trek, [it] wasn’t all at the onset. So, I think having a training at the beginning... like a virtual webinar or interactive training, anything around supervision... a training that... was specific to the job functions would be helpful and especially as a peer supervisor.”—Peer Supervisor

Most supervisors we spoke with received very little training related to supervising peers. Training needs for supervisors will vary and may be dependent on the background of the supervisor. For example, clinicians or program managers that become supervisors for the first time may need additional training on the peer model and scope of practice. On the other hand, peers who grow into supervisory positions may need specific direction and training around administrative leadership and supervision.

Many supervisors spoke about the importance of organizational leadership’s understanding of the peer model, which impacts peers on multiple levels. Lack of understanding can be burdensome for supervisors who feel that they must constantly educate their own supervisors about how the peer role is distinct from other team members.

“I think there’s buy-in from supervisors around peer support, but I’m not totally convinced they like completely understand it... I think there still could be some work done there.”—Peer Supervisor

Supervisors expressed that they need specific supports from their organization to provide high quality supervision:

- Structured and protected time for supervision
- Receiving regular supervision themselves (particularly if they are a peer)
- Reasonable workloads and ratios of supervision to peers

BRIGHT SPOTS for Supervision

- **ARC and Adapt** both ensure that peer supervisors have access to clinical supervision themselves.
- **Colombia Care** has a peer manager that is providing training about the peer role to other supervisors and leadership in the organization so they may better understand the peer role.
- **Youth Era** has recently developed a supervisor training for Youth Peer Supervisors.

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 PEER TRAINING

ORGANIZATIONAL BEST PRACTICES*	WHY IS IT NEEDED?
Hire and promote peers into supervision and management positions	Peers expressed that being supervised by someone who themselves is a peer and is familiar with the peer role and scope of work is tremendously important. Organizations can explore ways to move peers into supervisory roles and the training needed to facilitate this.
Provide more extensive training and onboarding support for new peer supervisors	Training and onboarding can help set shared expectations and consistent standards for supervision across different programs with an agency. Peers moving into a supervisory role and supervisors who are new to supporting peers may need additional tailored supports to be successful.
Ensure that supervisors on staff have time and encouragement to meet individually with each of their peer reports at minimum 1x/month	Providing supportive supervision requires time. Organizational supervision standards can ensure minimum individual time with supervisors in addition to appropriate ratios of supervisors to employees.

Educate leadership and other decision-makers within the organization about the peer role and scope of practice	Without organizational buy-in, supervisors are limited in their ability to implement many of the best practices and supportive strategies for peers.
REGIONAL BEST PRACTICES*	WHY IS IT NEEDED?
Support access to supervision training for peer organizations across the region	Support for a specific regional training related to supervision could help standardize supervision practices across the region. Some peer supervisors emphasize that training should include an emphasis on reflective supervision practices along with clinical and administrative supervision.
Encourage direct supervision by peers themselves and/or co-supervision models	Ensure all peers have access to supervisors with experiential knowledge of peer services.
Funders should include sufficient funding and explicit budget line items for supervision within grants and contracts for peer services	Many supervisors we spoke to expressed feeling stretched thin and supervising many staff members. Integrating more comprehensive supervisions practices will require resourcing the time and training. Funders can couple their practice expectations with sufficient funding to implement these practice changes.

*Best practices elevated by peers and peer supervisors



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