

VA Peer Support

The Road to Recovery



VA Peer Specialists

As living and breathing examples of recovery, peer support specialists can attest to the utility and effectiveness of treatment, rehabilitation, and support.



VA

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Peer Specialists' Qualifications

The Veterans' Mental Health and Other Care Improvement Act (2008) requires that every VA Peer Specialist must:

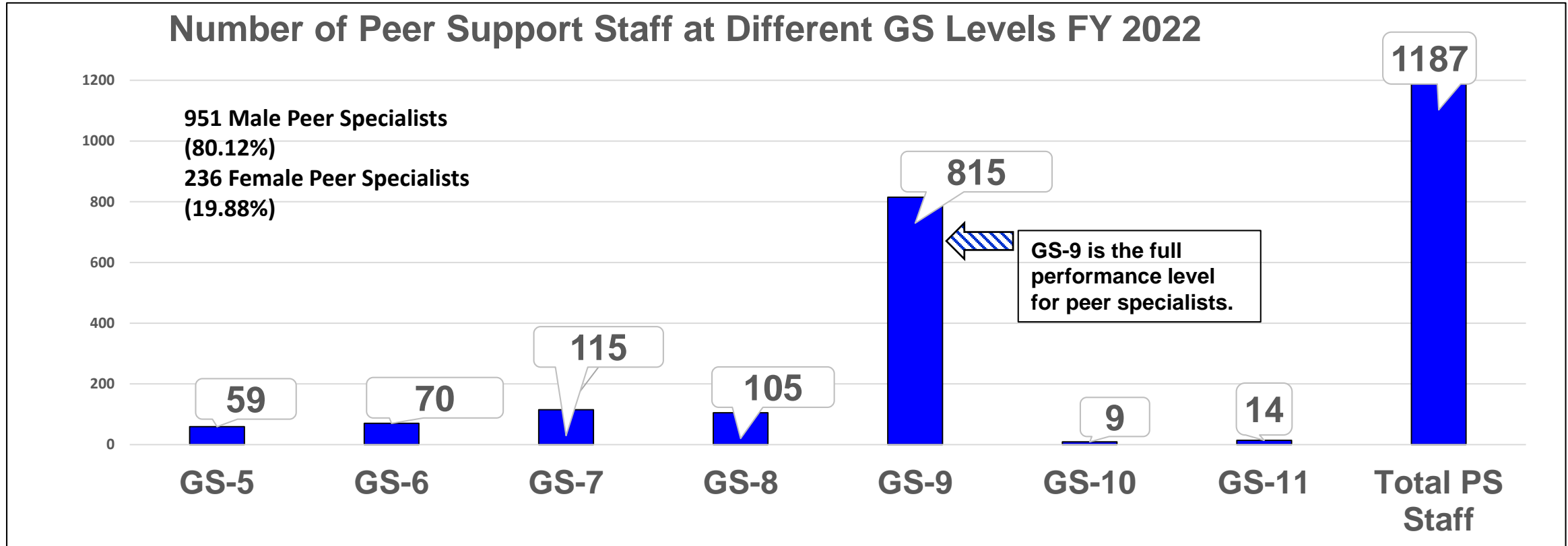
- be a Veteran with other than dishonorable discharge.
- be in recovery from a mental health condition for a minimum of 1 year.
- Self-identify with lived experience of mental illness and/or co-occurring addictive disorder.
- Have prior experience through employment or volunteer work to meet the specialized experience requirement.
- be certified through a VA-approved or state-approved Peer Specialist certification training program and complete 75 hours of training in ethics, confidentiality, and navigating the VA Healthcare System.
- Maintain 12 CEU's of training each year.



Scope of Practice for All Peer Specialists in VA

- Act as recovery role model and share personal recovery story when appropriate.
- Assist Veterans to determine personal recovery and wellness goals.
- Empower Veterans to identify their strengths, skills, supports and resources needed to assist with their goals.
- Facilitate peer support groups.
- Assist Veterans to learn goal setting, problem solving, and wellness self-management skills.
- Support Veterans in crisis, use C-SSRS for risk screening, and provide a warm handoff to clinicians when needed.
- Help Veterans learn how to effectively self-advocate.
- Assist Veterans out in the community with their community integration activities.
- Share information about available VA and community resources.

Peer Specialist Staff Currently In VHA



Who Are Peer Specialists & What Do They Do?

- Peer Specialists (PS) in VHA, are Veterans and VA employees who help Veterans with serious mental illnesses and substance use disorders to successfully engage in their recovery treatment.
- PSs promote recovery by sharing their own recovery stories, providing encouragement, instilling a sense of hope, and teaching coping skills to Veterans.
- PS have defined competencies and are trained to use our lived experiences to help Veterans identify and achieve specific life goals related to recovery.



What Peer Specialists Don't Do

- Diagnose Veterans
- Manage finances for Veterans
- Perform psychotherapy with Veterans
- Enforce others' medication adherence
- Perform breathalyzers and/or observe urine
- Make medication recommendations to others
- Serve as the only staff driver for Veterans' or program's needs
- Interpret assessment scores and review assessment results with Veterans
- Work solely as the main health care professional with a Veteran in a crisis.
- Act as the sole/primary driver to meet Veterans' transportation needs. Peer specialists are not Uber drivers.



Where Do Peer Specialists Work?

- Inpatient mental health and substance use treatment programs
- Residential mental health and substance use treatment programs
- Outpatient general mental health clinics
- Outpatient specialty substance use treatment programs
- PTSD specialty clinics
- Psychiatric emergency rooms

- Suicide prevention
- Veterans Crisis Line's Peer Support Outreach Center
- Primary care patient aligned care teams (PACT)
- Homeless programs
- Vocational rehabilitation services
- Veterans Justice Outreach
- VA research centers (ex. Mental Illness Research, Education, and Clinical Center)

Who Are The Peer Specialists In Southern Arizona VA Health Care System

- **Rennie Bonnick** – HUD-VASH
- **Lori Kiefer** – HUD-VASH
- **Mike Adams** – HUD-VASH
- **Rosemary Griffin** – HUD-VASH, SV
- **Robert Gadsden** – HVHC
- **Richard Brown** – HPACT
- **Buzz Hickox** – Suicide Prevention/Lead
- **Wayne Edmonson** – BHIP
- **Calvin Hill** – SUDTP
- **Kris Hamilton** – PC-MHI
- **Brandon Williams**– CWT
- **DeWayne Raulerson** – SUDTP

Who Are The Peer Specialists In Phoenix VA Health Care System

- **Larry Triplett** – DOM-SUD
- **Carol Tucker** – DOM-SUD
- **Brian Madson** – MH Recovery Services, MHICM
- **Quintellea Grant-Carr** – MH Recovery Services, MHICM
- **Robert Warren** – Social Work/CWT
- **Kevin Floyd** – PRRC
- **Tracy Bell** – PRRC
- **Robert Braxton** – SUDTP
- **Raymond Perez** – Veterans Justice Program
- **Ray Sandra Topete** – Veterans Justice Program
- **Bella Hudspeth** – CRRC
- **Jesse Ruelas** – CRRC

Who Are The Peer Specialists In Northern Arizona VA Health Care System

- **JennyLee Challis** – Suicide Prevention
- **Steven Fought** – PTSD Clinical Team
- **Thomas Casados** – HVHC Mohave County
- **Johnny Erbacher** – HPACT
- **William King** – Domiciliary
- **Brooke Robbins** - Domiciliary

Why Did We Hire Peer Specialists?



- Improved outcomes for Veterans.
- Research and *experience* have shown how PS providers can improve problems at the client level and problems related to the overall treatment system.

What Are The Challenges With Peer Support?

Role confusion:

- Lack of clarity for PS providers' duties.

Staff resistance:

- Less supervision and support.
- Exclusion from treatment team meetings.

Unequal treatment:

- Encouraged to volunteer for PS roles rather than have paid position.
- Lack of a viable career path.
- Lack of access to medical records.
- Relegated to grunt work.
- Questioning reasonable accommodations and scrutiny of sick leave.



Research Evidence about Peer Specialists

Research evidence about the positive impacts of peer specialists' services is still in the early stages of development in and outside of VHA. Overall, there is a positive signal that there are benefits for individuals who receive peer support services as part of their treatment services for mental health and/or substance use conditions:

- ✓ Improvements in mental health treatment engagement and treatment retention
- ✓ Reduction in symptoms of mental illness
- ✓ Improvements in abstinence from addictive substances
- ✓ Improvements on quality-of-life measures

(Ashford et al., 2019; Bassuk et al., 2016; Chinman et al., 2015; Grant et al., 2018; McCarthy et al., 2019)

Research Evidence about Peer Specialists

Benefits specifically for Veterans in working with peer specialists in the VA health care system, include:

- ✓ Increased hopefulness
- ✓ Increased treatment engagement
- ✓ Reduced isolation
- ✓ Reduced symptoms of mental illness
- ✓ Improved functioning
- ✓ Increased community integration

(Chinman et al., 2015; Chinman et al., 2018; Gorman et al, 2018; Hernandez-Tejada et al., 2017; Hernandez-Tejada et al., 2021; McCarthy et al., 2019; Resnik et al., 2017; Shaw et al., 2020)

Future Directions For Peer Specialists

- Establish national practice standards for peer specialist profession in VHA
- Continue to expand consultations and collaborations with other national offices to support training and successful implementation of peer specialists
- Increase hiring of peer specialists :
 - ✓ Expansion of peer specialists in Veterans Justice Outreach Program
 - ✓ Expansion of peer specialists in PACT if proposed legislation becomes law (pending approval)
 - ✓ FY2023 and FY2024 budget proposal to hire more women peer specialists (pending approval).



Questions?

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