

# Peer Connections:

## A 2024 Special Report on Peer Services in San Diego County



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**A Note about Art as a Medium of Healing**

This report features artwork created by talented local San Diego artists who contributed to the Strengths-Based Case Management Art Show, produced by the County-operated Strengths-Based Case Management (SBCM) Program Team.

The use of art therapy has been shown to help manage symptoms and is a powerful medium for individuals to share their stories. Held multiple times throughout the year, the Strengths-Based Case Management Art Show was founded to honor those living with behavioral health conditions, shining a healing light on their journeys through the inspiring art they create. An array of fine art mediums are featured, including paint, charcoal, clay, watercolor, poetry, and more.

We invite you to explore the creative expressions within this report and appreciate the beauty and strength conveyed through the art. For more information about the Strengths-Based Case Management Art Show, visit:

[https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/sdc/hhsa/programs/bhs/Case\\_management.html](https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/sdc/hhsa/programs/bhs/Case_management.html)

COVER ART BY NICOLE LEWIS



PHOTO CREDIT: JERMAINE EE, UNSPLASH

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# Introduction

Welcome to *Peer Connections: A 2024 Special Report on Peer Services in San Diego County*. This report illuminates the vital role of peer services within the behavioral health landscape, showcasing how these programs are transforming lives and communities. As you journey through the following pages, you will encounter inspiring personal stories and compelling data that collectively underscore the efficacy and impact of peer support.

**Peer Programs are Effective:** The data in this report unequivocally demonstrate the effectiveness of peer programs. Individuals supported by peers often experience significant improvements in their mental health and overall well-being. This report highlights how the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Next Steps and PeerLINKS peer programs have reduced hospital readmissions and fostered stronger community connections.

**Personal Stories of Recovery:** At the heart of this report are the moving stories of individuals who have found hope and healing through peer support. These narratives provide a human face to the statistics, showcasing the profound personal impact of peer counselors. For instance, you will read about Alex, who found hope and began his recovery journey with the help of a dedicated peer support specialist, ultimately transforming his life.

**Insights from Peer Counselors:** This report delves into the experiences and insights of peer counselors themselves. Their perspectives offer valuable lessons on the challenges and successes of peer support, highlighting the importance of empathy, shared experiences, and continuous professional development. Peer counselors' voices emphasize the need for better support structures, adequate compensation, and increased recognition of their contributions.

**Utilizing Peer Services:** This report aims to encourage more behavioral health programs to integrate peer services effectively. Detailed sections outline strategies for implementing peer programs, including recruitment, comprehensive training, and supportive supervision. By adopting these best practices, organizations can enhance their service delivery and better meet the needs of their clients.

**Becoming a Peer Counselor:** This report provides a clear pathway to certification for those inspired to become peer counselors. It outlines the necessary steps and qualities required, emphasizing the importance of lived experience, empathy, and a commitment to continuous growth. Becoming a certified peer support specialist offers individuals a meaningful way to give back and support others on their recovery journeys.

*Peer Connections: A 2024 Special Report on Peer Services in San Diego County* serves as both a guide and an inspiration. It is a testament to the power of peer support in fostering resilience, recovery, and community. As you explore the stories, data, and insights within this report, we hope you will be encouraged to utilize peer services more frequently and effectively and consider the rewarding path of becoming a peer counselor. Together, we can continue to build a supportive community that shines brightly with hope and promise.

# Journeys of Hope: A Story of Recovery from NAMI Next Steps

by Kelly Newman, Peer Support Specialist

**I am a certified peer support specialist for the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) San Diego. I've been with the team for just under five years, working with both the community and hospital teams. I have bipolar I and am also in recovery from alcohol use disorder, with over 12 years of recovery. I am an active member of Alcoholics Anonymous.**

The patient I would like to talk about is named Alex (name changed for privacy). I was first told about him when he was a patient at the San Diego County Mental Hospital. Alex had been brought to the hospital because he attempted suicide. Let me give some background: Alex, in his mid-40s, married with two teenage sons, attempted suicide after his wife told him she was going to leave him and take their sons because of his drinking. Alex was in a very bad state, both physically and mentally, and did not know what to do. He had never experienced mental health problems before, had never been hospitalized, nor had he undergone any kind of therapy.

When I met Alex, he was crying and very upset, unable to believe the state he was in. I first asked him to explain what was going on and why he was in the hospital. He shared that he couldn't believe he was going to lose his family because of his drinking. He was unfamiliar with therapy and didn't know what it was or if he could commit to it. He was particularly distressed when talking about his two sons. He was also self-employed, and with his income dwindling, he expressed concerns about affording therapy.

I let him talk at length, just listening as he expressed his fears and frustrations. Then, I asked him if he'd like to hear my story. He was interested, so I told him about the pain and the years I spent trying to quit drinking, the emotional damage I caused to those around me during my youth. He seemed to calm down after this and asked questions about how I managed to quit. I told him, "I finally got sick and tired of being sick and tired." I explained that my turning point was realizing my life would never improve unless I changed. I asked my sister for help, came to San Diego, and that started my recovery journey. Shortly after that, I became a peer support specialist because I wanted to help others as I had been helped, to give back what I received.



ART BY BETTE ANN PIERCE

## A STORY OF RECOVERY FROM NAMI NEXT STEPS

Alex was in the hospital for about five days; we met several times during his stay. He gradually became less emotional and more stable, although he needed some psychotropic drugs to manage severe withdrawal symptoms. Alex was open about his emotions and what he was going through. I shared my experiences from early recovery, which he found relatable. He eventually spoke with his wife, who said she would consider reconciling if he committed to long-term treatment. He was initially hesitant due to financial concerns and doubts about his ability to stop drinking.

We discussed his hesitations at length until he became more open to the idea. The day before his discharge, his wife found a long-term recovery facility out of state that offered a payment plan, which alleviated some of his financial worries. I gave him an Alcoholics Anonymous Big Book and a Twelve and Twelve,<sup>1</sup> writing a personal note in the latter expressing my belief in his strength and commitment.

He was moved by this gesture and expressed newfound hope—a feeling he admitted was rare for him. He was discharged the following day and began his recovery in another state immediately after. Unfortunately, I didn't see him before he left, but his nurse handed me a note from him that read, "Kelly, from the bottom of my heart, thank you. Your kindness and gentleness have saved my life. I can't repay you enough. Your work is a powerful statement of hope in a dark world. I hadn't felt hope in a long time, and you restored that for me. Your humble and steadfast example will never be forgotten. With love and peace, Alex."

This is why I do this work. To receive such responses touches my heart deeply. It's a reminder of why I'm a peer support specialist. Many have helped me when I was in dark places; understanding Alex's perspective and seeing him respond in kind truly touches me. It's why I continue in this field. And that's my story. Thank you.

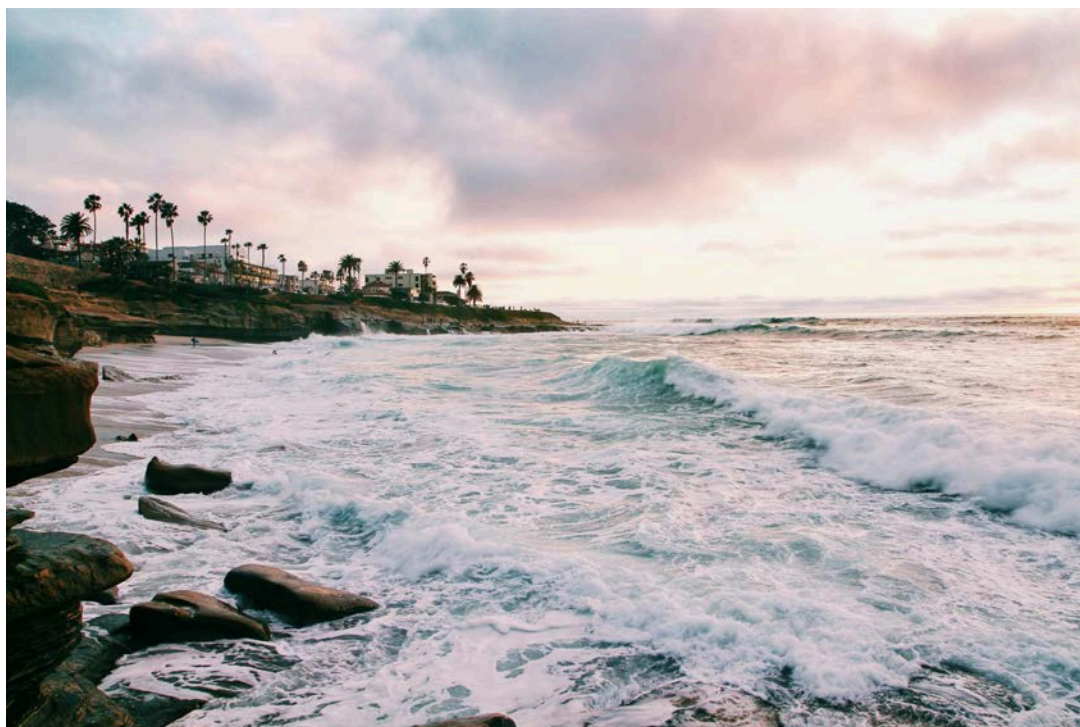


PHOTO CREDIT: MONTYLOV, UNSPLASH

[1] Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions (Twelve and Twelve) is a book that explains the 24 basic principles of Alcoholics Anonymous.

# Transforming Lives: The Impact of NAMI Next Steps on Clients

by Kim Center

An ongoing challenge for the San Diego County Psychiatric Hospital (SDCPH) is the low engagement of its patients with local services.<sup>1</sup> To address this issue, during Fiscal Year 2014-15, NAMI San Diego created Next Steps, a peer-based transitional care program designed to bridge the gap between inpatient psychiatric treatment and community-based recovery for adults 18 and older, including transition-age youth and older adults with mental health and substance abuse issues. NAMI Next Steps is funded by the County of San Diego and utilizes Mental Health Services Act (MHSA) Prevention and Early Intervention (PEI) funding. This program is a collaborative partnership between TURN Behavioral Health Services (formerly Mental Health Services, Inc.) and the Union of Pan Asian Communities (UPAC), with NAMI San Diego as the lead agency. The Next Steps team consists of trained peer support specialists, family support specialists, substance use counselors, behavioral health consultants, and health navigators, most of whom have lived experience with serious mental illness, substance use, or a co-occurring disorder or have a family member with lived experience.

**What Makes Next Steps Unique:** As a peer-based program, the peer support specialists at Next Steps draw upon their own lived experiences and help participants navigate San Diego County services. The program strives to provide timely access to services and create an environment that empowers participants to achieve their self-defined wellness goals by modeling self-management, developing self-care skills, and connecting participants to vital community resources and services to support their recovery.

When interviewed by Health Services Research Center (HSRC) staff about the program's goals, Next Steps staff described one of the program's successes as being able to develop trust and authentic connections with participants by sharing their own lived experiences. Such lived experience allowed the staff to provide specialized guidance in engaging the client with services. Next Steps staff also expressed benefiting personally from their relationships with participants, as providing support and sharing their lived experiences provided an emotional reward and a sense of purpose.

**“I think what works well is our staff’s ability to connect with folks the way that a traditional clinician cannot.” -Next Steps Staff**

**“I think building that relationship... where they can trust you to say things to you, and they trust that you have their best interests at heart. So I think when you act on it, and you’re actually showing them that you’re putting in the work just as much as they are, then they’re more receptive.” -Next Steps Staff**

**“... to know that you’ve connected with someone in such a vulnerable way about something that’s so painful, shameful, challenging, difficult that’s been messing them up, and they share that and say okay and you empathize, you support, sometimes you just sit and listen.” -Next Steps Staff**

[1] as stated in the April 2016 Performance Improvement Project titled *Client Engagement after Discharge from Psychiatric Hospital*.

## THE IMPACT OF NAMI NEXT STEPS ON CLIENTS

**What Services and Supports Does Next Steps Provide:** Next Steps staff provides individuals and family members within the SDCPH Emergency Unit or designated community clinics with support and resource information, which address the physical health, mental health, and substance use needs of participants. Next Steps also supports participants' need for food, shelter, transportation, and other social services that affect quality of life and promote successful recovery and reintegration into the community. Services and supports are tailored based on the needs and goals of participants and could include:

- Information on community resources and linkage to services for mental health, physical health, and substance abuse
- Support in obtaining health insurance and other benefits
- Coaching, mentoring, and peer/family support and education
- Health navigation services

Everyone who contacts the Next Steps program, including participants and their families, can receive support and referrals to helpful resources. Additionally, some individuals choose to fully join the program as enrolled participants. Enrolled participants agree to meet with a peer specialist, and together they:

- Set goals for recovery
- Use multiple assessments and measures to help in treatment planning

The program also wants to work with your family members or friends. These people can support you as you recover.

### Who received services from Next Steps last year?

In Fiscal Year 2022-23, Next Steps connected with **2,545 individuals**. Of those, 239 were enrolled participants, and 20 were family or friends of enrolled participants. The majority of enrolled participants entered the program at a crucial time in their lives.



**32%**

of enrolled participants experienced homelessness at intake.



**62%**

of enrolled participants reported that they felt depressed at intake.



**82%**

of enrolled participants reported that their quality of life was poor or fair at intake.



**20%**

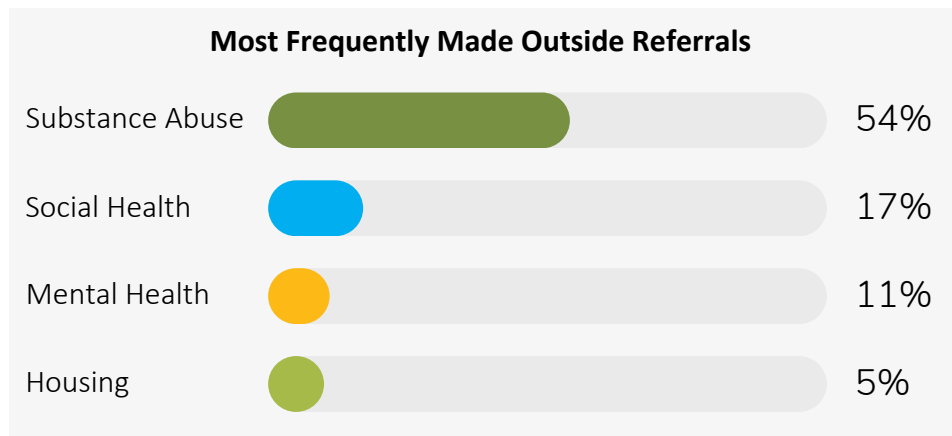
of enrolled participants reported using substances almost always or often at intake.



## THE IMPACT OF NAMI NEXT STEPS ON CLIENTS

**Impact of Next Steps Program:** A major component of Next Steps is to provide information about resources and to connect participants to services. Next Steps provided 2,930 services to 530 individuals. On average, each participant received approximately six of these direct services, and the most frequently provided services were peer navigation (35%), peer counseling (16%), assessment (15%), and substance abuse treatment or counseling (15%). The graph below shows the most frequently made types of referrals during Fiscal Year 2022-23. Although the percentage of clients referred to services appears low, many people were already connected to some types of services, especially mental health.

**NEXT STEPS STAFF MEMBERS MADE 4,075 REFERRALS DURING FISCAL YEAR 2022-23. 62% OF ALL REFERRALS WERE SUCCESSFUL LINKAGES.**



Data collected at intake and follow-ups show several beneficial outcomes for participants who engaged in the program. Successful outcomes were shown by a significant improvement in the Milestones of Recovery Scale (MORS), a tool used to assess clinician’s perception of client recovery. Participants also completed the Combined Health Assessment: Mental, Physical, Social, Substance, Strengths (CHAMPSSS) assessment. CHAMPSSS is a self-reported measure where participants rate items on a scale of Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, and Always. Participants indicated that they were making important strides with their recovery and overall mental health, particularly in the areas of anxiety, depression, suicidality, anger, and memory, as demonstrated by the improved CHAMPSSS ratings in these areas. Additionally, a review of Patient Reported Outcomes Measurement and Information System (PROMIS) Global Health scores yielded positive results. PROMIS Global Health scores, rated on a scale of 1 to 5, showed a significant improvement in physical and mental health symptoms overall.

Major successes are evidenced by the increase in enrolled participants reporting that they have a primary care provider and that they have seen a primary care provider within the past year. Additionally, fewer Next Steps participants reported experiencing homelessness while being a participant in Next Steps between intake and follow-up.



ART BY STEPHEN DEPRATTI

## THE IMPACT OF NAMI NEXT STEPS ON CLIENTS

Finally, most Next Steps participants reported feeling more comfortable seeking help. Participants also reported that they had gained competency in their ability to access resources, with a majority responding at follow-up that they knew where to get help if needed as a result of the program. The majority of participants also reported that they were extremely satisfied with the services Next Steps provided.



**“Your organization is made up of really caring and helpful people that I never knew existed. Do you know what anxiety feels like? To me, it’s like a constant state of half-terror. If I hadn’t met you, I would just be lost on the internet looking for help. You are great at your job and you really helped me... I wouldn’t mind if you called me every day!”**

**-Next Steps Participant**

# Voices from the Field: Insights from Peer Counselors

by Katie Wan

**The Mental Health Services Act (MHSA) provides significant funding for the San Diego County Behavioral Health Services (BHS) system of care. The primary aims of the MHSA are to increase access to unserved and underserved individuals and families by reducing disparities in the service delivery system. To facilitate these efforts, the MHSA incorporates a Community Program Planning (CPP) process through which counties gather input from a diverse range of stakeholders regarding the needs and priorities of community members. In San Diego, the community engagement activities are led by the UC San Diego Health Partnership. The Partnership is committed to authentic community engagement efforts, focusing on equity and promoting community empowerment of unserved, underserved, and hard-to-reach populations.**

In FY 2023-24, the UC San Diego Health Partnership, in collaboration with BHS, developed a stakeholder outreach and engagement plan to facilitate a county-wide community engagement effort designed to inform the MHSA Annual Update to the current County's MHSA Three-Year Plan for 2023-2026, which guides the provision of behavioral health services throughout the County of San Diego. The UC San Diego Health Partnership team facilitated three primary types of community engagement activities to gather information from community stakeholders throughout the County: 1) key informant interviews, 2) focus groups, and 3) listening sessions.

In FY 2023-24, the UC San Diego Health Partnership conducted 20 key informant interviews, 20 focus groups, and 14 listening sessions, engaging over 400 people. Of the 20 focus groups held, one was with peer support specialists, and one was with mental health advocates with self-identified lived experience of mental illness in San Diego County. A total of eight individuals participated in these groups. The next two pages detail the specific findings from those two focus groups.

## Survey Results for Substance Use Services and Connections

Treatment follow-up rates for individuals in San Diego County who visit the emergency department (ED) for alcohol or other drug (AOD) abuse or dependence are low, and peer support has been the focus of intervention to improve connection rates. In October 2022, Drug Medi-Cal Organized Delivery System (DMC-ODS) clients receiving services were asked about their experience using the emergency department (ED) for a substance use-related emergency.

When asked about peer support:

- 75% of adult clients and 70% of youth clients responded that they would be likely to schedule an appointment with a substance use treatment program if contacted by a peer with similar experiences about their ED visit.
- Adult clients were more likely to schedule a visit with a substance use disorder provider if contacted by a peer rather than staff without similar experience (55%).
- Youth clients largely remained neutral (63%) in their likelihood of scheduling a visit if contacted by a peer, as opposed to staff without similar experience.

Peers can be used in this setting to expand the available workforce, work with patients to connect them to care, and more personally connect with patients seeking care.

## INSIGHTS FROM PEER COUNSELORS

**Peer Support Specialists and Mental Health Advocates Input:** Participants shared several concerns about mental health that they see in their community; however, barriers to services were their most common concern. Participants discussed the lack of mental health resources for children: *“It’s even hard for me to find youth-tailored resources to put on that application for parents to get help for their children because a lot of the resources out for mental health and substance use disorder are just for 18 and over.”*

Participants were wary about the changes to the clubhouse model in San Diego being more structured around obtaining employment and job readiness skills: *“We used to be artistic and creative and musical,”* but the shift *“towards a working model, where now they’re going to program us to get jobs”* includes changes made with *“little to no input”* from people with lived experience: *“Where was our voice in taking this new clubhouse model? In shifting everything away? Like I’ve heard from quite a few people that they are really disheartened. And now they’ve left the clubhouse, and that was their little safe place.”*

Participants emphasized the shortcomings of a biomedical model of diagnosis when it comes to mental health. As one participant shared, *“I don’t believe that the biomedical model completely answers what these things are... maybe let’s stop medicalizing [the mind]... I don’t think forced treatment is the way to go. I think it’s a very temporary Band-Aid fix.”*

All of the participants from each of the focus groups highlighted the importance of peer support specialists in behavioral health programs. As one participant shared, *“A strength about the peer model that doesn’t get talked about as much, but it’s really learning from one another how to adapt and accommodate within the system.”* Another participant shared the need for BHS administration to respect the expertise of peer support specialists, stating, *“The point is that they expect us to respect their education [BHS administration] and trust that their plan is accurate and successful. But then when we try to use our education, which is street, and drugs, and trauma, they somehow go blind and don’t respect our education.”*

Participants recommended more peer-led models of care and more pay for peer support specialists. For example, one participant mentioned the Soteria House, a community-based residential alternative for people experiencing mental health crises, focusing on minimal medication and peer support: *“I would love to see like a Soteria house sort of model where there’s this peer community where peers look after each other. And it’s this larger sort of ecosystem... imagine if that was funded by the County of San Diego.”* Another participant highlighted the rigorous training for peer support partners and asserted the pay should reflect the work involved: *“This is pretty simple and sounds kind of terse, but pay the peer support partners more. Just pay them more. The amount of studying and testing is huge.”* Participants further suggested more active peer specialist recruitment by BHS. One participant added that there should be more recruitment of peers from different ethnicities and cultures: *“BHS should have that active peer recruiting entity that is filling spots that are speaking different languages, that are from different cultures, that are from war-torn countries where we’re getting the most immigrants.”*



ART BY BRETTANI BOCK

## INSIGHTS FROM PEER COUNSELORS

**Overall Engagement Effort Findings and Recommendations:** Overall, the learnings across all engagement activities were robust, with many community-specific and regional highlights, as well as themes and ideas that were persistent throughout. One theme that arose across engagement activities was the increase in utilizing peers to provide behavioral health services and treatment. Participants across communities shared the importance and value of peer support specialists in the County. Many participants shared the need to increase peer support services and increase the wages of hired peer support specialists. According to many of the participants we spoke to, peer support is of the utmost value when it comes to treatment and recovery.

This feedback from participants can help shape recommendations around peers. For example, programs can develop proposals for peer support and group therapy, working to engage families and support their youth. Substance use prevention programs may also be useful for targeting cycles of addiction and using drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism. Specifically, prevention programs and activities should include peer-to-peer programs and mentorship. Lastly, participants shared a lack of employment opportunities for disabled individuals, including people who experience mental illness. Some participants connected this issue to a lack of behavioral health providers and suggested a more streamlined way for people with lived experience to become peer support specialists.

Below are some specific recommendations developed for the [FY 2024-25 MHSA Annual Update](#) around peers:

- Utilize peers to provide a diverse and reliable workforce and promote continuity of care for and engagement with patients.
- Hire and train peers to provide health education, disease prevention, and support for patients in their communities.
- Combat stigma by working to normalize mental illness among youth and families (e.g., discussions, group therapy, peer-to-peer mentorship).
- Explore the utilization of alternative and non-traditional models of healing, such as the peer-driven Soteria house for persons living with psychosis.

## FUTURE DIRECTION & CALL TO ACTION

### **Transparency and Communication:**

Our community engagement efforts prioritize a communication and feedback process between government organizations and the community to ensure transparency and accountability.

### **Let's Connect on Instagram:**

Join our Instagram community if you want to connect with us and learn about our upcoming community engagement efforts.



@ucsd.hp

**For any questions or desire to learn more about how to get involved in the Community Engagement process, please contact [MHSVOICES@HEALTH.UCSD.EDU](mailto:MHSVOICES@HEALTH.UCSD.EDU)**

# The Story of PeerLINKS

by Luz Pinto

**PeerLINKS in San Diego County, a NAMI San Diego program, has been pivotal in supporting individuals navigating the complexities of mental health and substance use challenges. The program was specifically designed to bridge the gap between clinical services and community resources, employing peer/family support specialists who provided invaluable guidance and served as a beacon of hope based on their own lived experiences with behavioral health conditions.**

**Program Description:** PeerLINKS offered a structured yet personalized approach to support. Each client was paired with a peer/family support specialist, who helped them connect to necessary behavioral health treatments, manage their recovery processes, and access social and community resources. Perhaps most importantly, their peer believed in them, empowered them to take an active role in pursuing their goals and recovery, provided hope and encouragement, and walked alongside them, ensuring “they were not alone” in the journey. This partnership was maintained for up to six months, during which specialists worked closely with clients in community settings and remotely via phone or text.

PeerLINKS aimed to empower clients by increasing their knowledge about available treatments, services, and resources, and how to access them. The PeerLINKS team believed in clients’ ability to recover as well as their ability to actively participate in the pursuit of their goals. Therefore, whenever possible, peer/family support specialists followed a model of “doing with” and working alongside clients to build their self-confidence and skills. This empowerment was facilitated through education, shared decision-making, and the active involvement of clients in their own recovery plans. This comprehensive approach sought to strengthen individual capacities and paved the way for measurable improvements in their mental health and community integration.

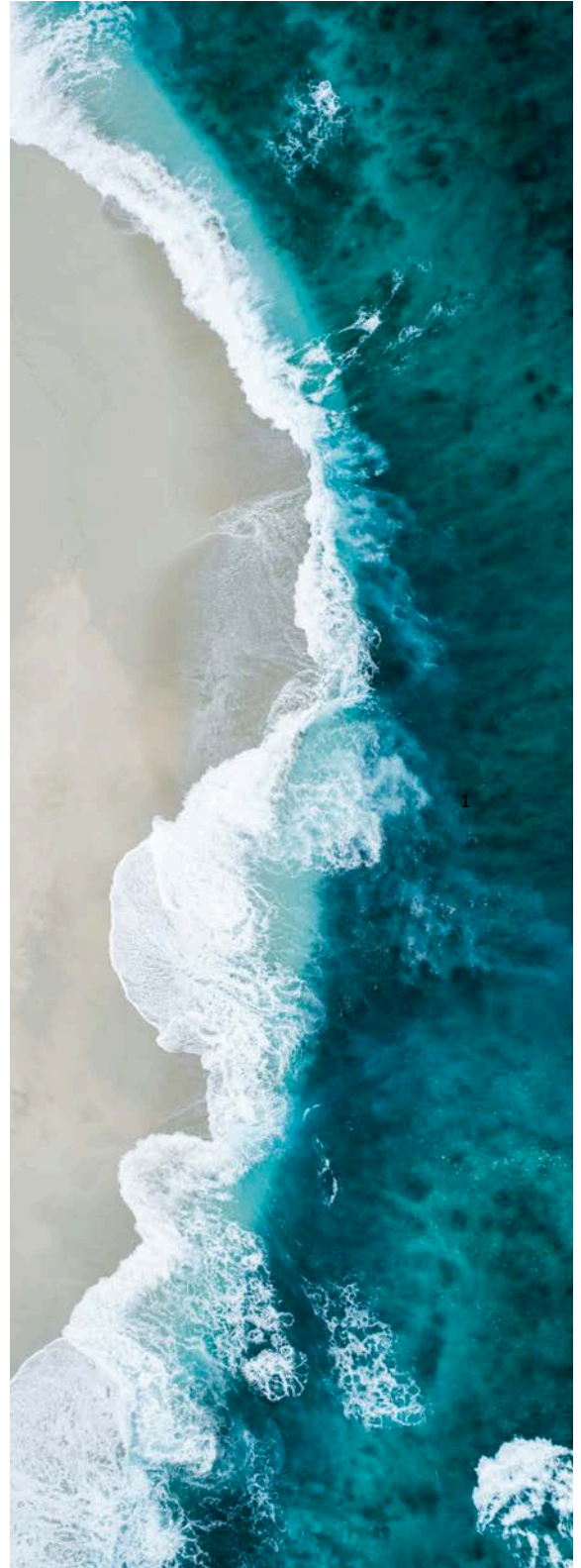


PHOTO CREDIT: SHIFAZZ SHAMOON, UNSPLASH

## THE STORY OF PEERLINKS

**Positive Impacts and Key Findings:** The positive effects of PeerLINKS on clients were substantial and multi-faceted.<sup>1</sup>

- **Improved Mental Health Outcomes:** Clients experienced significant improvements in overall health and well-being. Reports highlighted decreases in symptoms of depression, anxiety, and anger, contributing to enhanced emotional and psychological resilience.
- **Reduced Rehospitalization:** One of the primary objectives of PeerLINKS was to minimize the frequency of psychiatric rehospitalizations among clients. The program successfully reduced these instances by providing continuous support after hospital discharge, thereby cutting down on associated medical costs.
- **Increased Community Connections:** The program fostered greater engagement with community-based preventive health programs and resources, collaborating and making referrals with nearly 200 programs throughout San Diego County ranging from health, mental health, substance use, housing, employment, immigration services, basic needs, transportation, legal support, Homeless Court, and more. Clients were able to rebuild their support networks and connect more effectively with local services, which is crucial for long-term recovery and reintegration into society.

**Program Reach and Community Involvement:** PeerLINKS served a diverse demographic, including adults with mental health conditions who were covered under Medi-Cal, lacked insurance, or were eligible for Medi-Cal. This inclusivity ensured that no individual was denied access due to financial constraints or insurance coverage issues.

**Conclusion and Legacy:** As PeerLINKS approaches its conclusion, the program's innovative approaches and proven successful outcomes provide a valuable model for future mental health support programs.

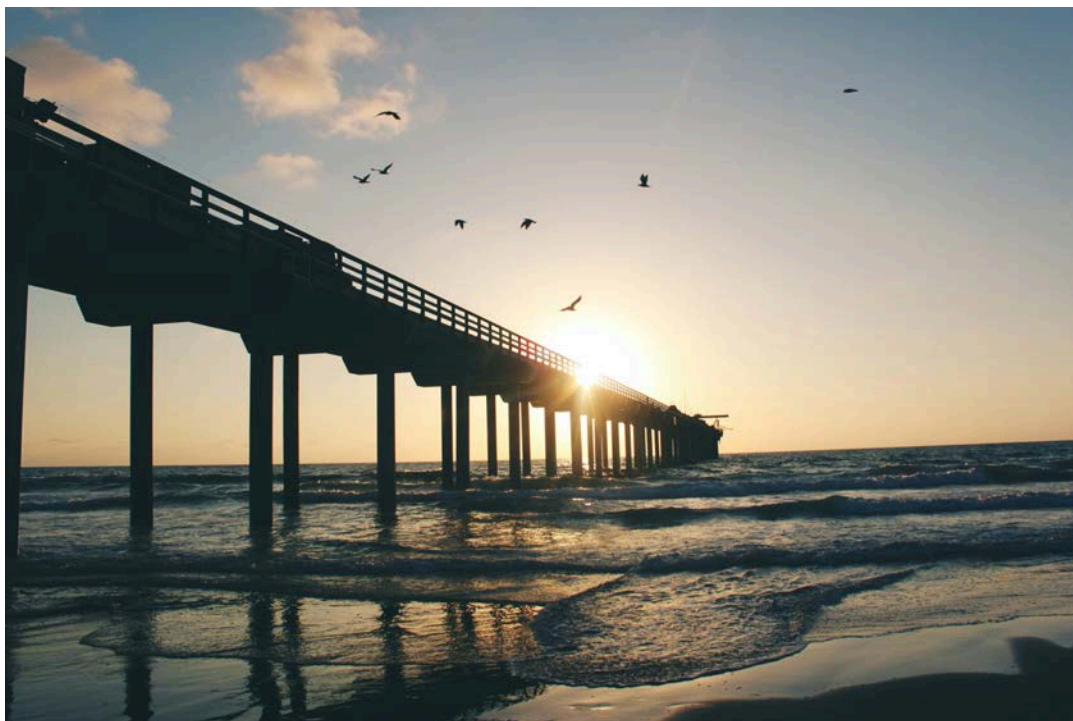


PHOTO CREDIT: NICK JIO, UNSPLASH

[1] Findings sourced from The Scattergood Foundation's website: [https://www.scattergoodfoundation.org/award\\_submission/nami-san-diego-peerlinks/](https://www.scattergoodfoundation.org/award_submission/nami-san-diego-peerlinks/).

# Journeys of Hope: A Story of Recovery from NAMI PeerLINKS

by Miriam Munoz, Peer Support Specialist

**As a teenager, I struggled with my mental health and substance use problems. Programs that I had access to weren't helpful, given their religious focus. I was not personally religious and worked outside of these programs to educate myself, change my lifestyle, and improve my health. Initially, I used my experience and education to become a substance use counselor. Through my experience as a counselor, I found that dealing with mental health issues was often a reason for substance use in a lot of individuals. Because of this, I strived to better educate myself on mental health and how to help address multiple factors that play a role in overall health. My current work aims to address these many points as a counselor and advocate for clients who struggle with mental health and substance use disorders, as well as clients who experience domestic violence and sexual assault.**

Seeing my experience and education help clients can be extremely rewarding. A particular client that comes to mind is an older woman, referred by the Psychiatric Emergency Response Team (PERT), who needed support while grieving. This client was in her 90s and had difficulty with hearing, communication, and accessing technical resources. She had limited emotional support with no children or family and found most of her support through her pets. Unfortunately, during the pandemic, she had to put down two of her cats, including burying them herself, and struggled emotionally with the loss. She also talked about her emotional support dog, who significantly assisted with tasks such as notifying her when her phone rang, if someone was at the door, and if there was a weird noise, in addition to being there for emotional support. Sadly, she had also recently lost this dog and was experiencing significant grief. When I first connected with her, she was very down, soft-spoken, and withdrawn in her grief from the loss of the most meaningful emotional support in her life.

As someone who has personally dealt with mental health and substance use issues, I feel that peer counseling is so powerful in that you can personally relate to the experiences and emotions our clients are facing. Though every client has their own way of processing their emotions and trauma, peer support is so important because we understand to a certain extent what they are experiencing, and we can relate to our clients. That human connection is powerful and heals more than anything else. It's more than a pill; we can give them a hug. It shows them that this is more than a process; there are solutions.

Because of the connection I was able to make with this client, we were able to successfully manage her grief. We connected her with St. Paul's Senior Care, an organization that provides wrap-around services to address the many factors that contribute to overall health. She was able to get connected not only with emotional support but also with transportation services and an individual caregiver who could visit her home and help with her needs. I could tell that after only two services, there was already improvement. She was vocal about her gratitude, and I could hear and feel her relief and excitement. It was powerful to experience just how much our services can impact people's lives.



# Implementation and Utilization of Peer Behavioral Health Counselors

by Carol Gonzalez

In the evolving landscape of mental health services, organizations are increasingly recognizing the unique and valuable contributions of peer behavioral health counselors. With lived experience, peer counselors have a unique perspective in offering empathy, understanding, and real-world insights that are pivotal in supporting others with similar challenges. However, the effective integration of peer counselors into healthcare settings demands strategic planning and thoughtful implementation. This article explores comprehensive strategies for recruiting, training, integrating, and supporting peer counselors to maximize their impact within organizations.

**Recruitment:** Successful integration of peer behavioral health counselors starts with effective recruitment strategies. Organizations must focus on attracting candidates who share their lived experiences and exhibit a passion for helping others. Emphasizing diversity in the recruitment of peers in various cultural, racial, and economic groups ensures that the team reflects the community's demographics, enhancing the cultural competence and relevance of services offered. This approach helps address the varying and specific needs of diverse client groups and plays a crucial role in fostering an inclusive environment where different perspectives are valued.

**“BHS should have that active peer recruiting entity that is filling spots that are speaking different languages, that are from different cultures, that are from war-torn countries where we're getting the most immigrants.”**  
**-Peer Support Specialist Focus Group Participant**

**Comprehensive Training Programs:** Once recruited, peer counselors should undergo comprehensive training that equips them with the necessary skills to perform their roles effectively. This training should cover a wide range of competencies such as active listening, empathy, setting boundaries, crisis intervention, and cultural sensitivity. Additionally, understanding the organization's policies and ethical guidelines is crucial to ensure their practices align with professional standards. This training serves as the backbone of the efficacy in their roles, preparing them to support and empower patients in various situations while maintaining professionalism.



## IMPLEMENTATION AND UTILIZATION OF PEER BEHAVIORAL HEALTH COUNSELORS

**Clear Role Definitions and Integration into Multidisciplinary Teams:** Defining clear roles, responsibilities, and limits is essential to prevent overlap and confusion within the healthcare team. Peer counselors should understand how their roles complement those of other professionals, such as therapists and social workers. Integrating them into multidisciplinary teams is a strategic approach that ensures their insights from lived experiences are valued and utilized in planning and delivering care. This integration must be supported by a change in organizational culture that recognizes lived experience as a vital form of expertise, promoting a recovery-oriented approach to care.

**“The point is that they expect us to respect their education and trust that their plan is accurate and successful. But then when we try to use our education, which is street, and drugs, and trauma, they somehow go blind and don't respect our education.”**

**-Peer Support Specialist Focus Group Participant**

**Promoting an Organizational Culture of Inclusivity and Respect:** The efficacy of peer counseling is significantly influenced by the organizational culture in which it operates. Promoting a culture that values and respects peer contributions is essential. This involves educating all staff about the role and potential of peer support, challenging existing stigmas, and fostering collaboration across different levels of the organization. Organizations can foster this cultural shift by highlighting success stories of peer interventions and demonstrating through data and client feedback how peer support contributes to improved outcomes. Moreover, peer-led initiatives should be encouraged, allowing peer counselors to identify needs and deliver services in ways that resonate uniquely with their clients.

**Measuring Outcomes and Impact:** Organizations must develop methods to measure the outcomes and impact of peer support services. This might involve tracking client satisfaction, recovery outcomes, and the overall effectiveness of peer interventions. Feedback should be solicited not only from the clients who interact with peer counselors, but also from the peers themselves and other staff members. Collecting and analyzing this data not only supports continuous improvement but also helps justify the investment in peer support programs to stakeholders and funders.

**Supportive Supervision and Continuous Professional Development:** Ongoing support through mentorship and supervision is critical for peer counselors to navigate the complexities of their roles. These support systems should provide a space for discussing challenges, sharing successes, and planning career development. Furthermore, organizations should offer continuous professional development opportunities to help peer counselors stay updated on best practices and emerging research. Workshops, seminars, and additional training can invigorate their practice and ensure they are at the forefront of the field.

**“A strength about the peer model that doesn't get talked about as much, but it's really learning from one another how to adapt and accommodate within the system.”**

**-Peer Support Specialist Focus Group Participant**

**“I would love to see like a Soteria house sort of model where there's this peer community where peers look after each other.”**  
**-Peer Support Specialist Focus Group Participant**

**Addressing Challenges and Supporting Well-being:** Peer counselors face specific challenges such as burnout, navigating professional boundaries, and overcoming skepticism from traditional healthcare providers. Organizations need to address these issues by implementing robust support systems that include specialized training in ethics and boundaries, mental health and well-being support programs, and clear mechanisms for handling feedback and conflicts. Recognizing and actively addressing these challenges helps maintain the well-being of peer counselors and ensures the sustainability of their services.

**Compensation, Career Advancement, and Measuring Impact:** Fair compensation and clear career pathways are essential for acknowledging the contributions of peer counselors and providing them with growth opportunities within the organization. Recognizing the professional value of peer counselors through adequate compensation is essential for their retention and motivation. Additionally, creating clear career pathways for peer counselors helps retain top talent and motivates others in the organization by showing a commitment to the professional development of all staff. Career pathways might include opportunities for peers to advance into supervisory roles, specialize in certain types of support, or expand their qualifications through further education and training. This not only benefits the peers but also enhances the services offered by the organization.

**“This is pretty simple and sounds kind of terse but pay the peer support partners more. Just pay them more. The amount of studying and testing is huge.”**  
**-Peer Support Specialist Focus Group Participant**



ART BY CARY RYAN

**Conclusion:** Successfully integrating peer behavioral health counselors into mental health services requires a multifaceted approach that addresses both the needs of the peers and the goals of the organization. By implementing these strategies, organizations can ensure that peer counselors are not only supported in their roles but are also key drivers of innovation and quality in mental health care. The result is a more empathetic, effective, and holistic approach to supporting those in need, with peer counselors playing an integral role in shaping the future of mental health services.

# Becoming a Certified Peer Support Specialist

Becoming a certified peer support specialist in California involves a series of steps that are designed to prepare individuals with lived experience of mental illness and/or substance use disorders to provide support to others in their recovery journeys. The certification process reflects an effort to standardize the qualifications of peer support specialists and ensure they have the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively assist others.

## Meet the Basic Eligibility Requirements:

- **Lived Experience:** Individuals must have personal lived experience with the process of recovery from a mental illness, substance use disorder, or both, either personally or as a caregiver.
- **Age and Legal Requirements:** In California, individuals must be at least 18 years of age and possess a high school diploma or equivalent degree.
- **Service and Ethics:** Individuals must be willing to share their experiences, have a strong dedication to recovery, and agree with and adhere to the Code of Ethics.

**Apply for Certification:** Submit an application for certification as a peer support specialist [through the California Mental Health Services Authority \(CalMHSA\)](#).

This application requires applicants to watch an orientation video, complete the application, upload verification documents (government-issued ID/license/passport and high school diploma or equivalent), and pay the application fee. After CalMHSA program specialists review and approve the application, individuals have 12 months to complete an approved training program and pass the certification exam. For more details, go to:

<https://www.capeercertification.org/>



ART BY CARY RYAN

**Complete Required Training:** Enroll in a peer support specialist training program that has been approved by the CalMHSA. The training program usually covers a range of topics, including but not limited to the principles of recovery and peer support, communication skills, ethics and boundaries, cultural competence, and advocacy. While several CalMHSA-approved virtual programs are offered nationally, NAMI San Diego and Imperial Counties is a local organization approved to provide in-person training in San Diego.

## BECOMING A CERTIFIED PEER SUPPORT SPECIALIST

**Pass a Certification Examination:** After completing the training, candidates must upload their certificate of completion to their CalMHSA application. Upon approval and payment of the certification exam fee, candidates will schedule and sit for a proctored certification examination. Many training programs prepare candidates for the certification exam.

**Maintain and Renew Certification:** In California, certified peer support specialists are required to complete 20 hours of continued education every two years, which must include six hours of law and ethics training. Once this training is complete, individuals must submit a renewal application and pay a renewal fee prior to the expiration of their current certification.

**Working as a Certified Peer Support Specialist:** The Department of Health Care Services has defined the scope of work of certified peer support specialists to include educational skill-building groups, patient engagement, and non-clinical therapeutic activities to help patients attain and maintain recovery. Certified peer support specialists can work as members of integrated care teams, providing individual support within a health system or as part of peer support programs. Peer support specialists may specialize in certain areas or with certain groups of people to provide more individualized care.



PHOTO CREDIT: FELIX WOSTMAN, UNSPLASH

# Qualities of a Peer Support Specialist

Peer support specialists use their personal experiences to provide empathy, encouragement, and guidance. Here are the key qualities that make them effective in supporting others on their recovery journey.

## Deep Empathy and Understanding

An innate ability to connect with others' feelings and perspectives, grounded in their own experiences



## Effective and Compassionate Communication

Skills in listening actively and communicating thoughts and feelings in a supportive, constructive manner



## Authentic Lived Experience

Genuine personal experiences with mental health challenges or recovery, providing a foundation of relatability and trust



## Resilience and Personal Wellness

Demonstrating personal resilience and a commitment to their own wellness journey, serving as a model for others



## Open-mindedness and Non-judgmental Approach

A broad-minded approach that accepts individuals where they are, without judgment or preconceived notions



## Commitment to Continuous Growth

A dedication to personal and professional growth, including a willingness to learn and adapt as needed



## QUALITIES OF A PEER SUPPORT SPECIALIST

### Cultural Competency and Sensitivity

An understanding of and sensitivity to diverse cultural backgrounds and the ability to interact respectfully and effectively with all individuals



### Understanding and Maintaining Boundaries

The ability to navigate the delicate balance of sharing personal experiences while maintaining professional boundaries

### Strong Advocacy Skills

The ability to advocate effectively for others, using knowledge of systems and services to support individuals' needs and rights



### Integrity and Confidentiality

A strong ethical foundation, ensuring that personal information is handled with the utmost respect and privacy

### Inspirational and Motivational Abilities

The capacity to inspire and motivate others, encouraging them to pursue their goals and engage in their recovery journey



### Professionalism in All Interactions

Maintaining professionalism, even in less formal peer interactions, to foster trust and respect in all relationships

**While innately having these qualities can be helpful for peer support specialists, some qualities and skills can be developed through appropriate training and peer credentialing.**

# Where to Connect with Peer Support Services

Behavioral health peer support specialists are individuals with lived experience of mental health challenges who receive training to support patients and clients experiencing similar issues. Peer support specialists can offer a unique perspective and empathy while forming a crucial bridge between healthcare professionals and patients. They are increasingly being integrated into the health field in multiple ways, providing individual, group, and program support. These specialists are becoming a routine part of the healthcare system and offer assistance to patients as part of their regular healthcare experience.

Below is a list of programs that offer peer support throughout San Diego County. Blue underlined text denotes active links that can be clicked for more information if looking at this report electronically.

## [TURN Behavioral Health Services:](#)

- ACTION: Provides comprehensive services for individuals with severe mental health conditions through Assertive Community Treatment Intensive Outreach Needs.
- Bio-Psychosocial Rehabilitation (BPSR) Clinics: Offers outpatient mental health rehabilitation and recovery services.
- BPSR Wellness Recovery Centers: Focuses on holistic recovery and mental health wellness.
- BPSR Mental Health Centers: Delivers urgent walk-in services and long-term mental health support.

## [Community Research Foundation \(CRF\):](#)

- Maria Sardinas Wellness Recovery Center: Offers outpatient mental health services, including urgent care and rehabilitation.
- South Bay Guidance Wellness Recovery Center: Specializes in mental health recovery and support for adults.
- Peer Support Services at Assertive Community Treatments (ACTs) and Crisis Centers: Provides peer-led support in active community treatment settings and during crisis intervention.

## [NAMI San Diego:](#)

- Peer Connection Groups: Casual peer-led groups focused on sharing recovery experiences and support.
- Elevate Youth California Project: Youth leadership and substance misuse prevention programs.
- Next Steps: Offers recovery-oriented support focusing on mental and physical health and substance use recovery.
- Peer Support Hotline and Peer-led Education and Support Programs: Direct support and educational programs for individuals and families.

## [The Alpha Project:](#)

- Tenant Peer Support Services Program: Provides housing and case management services for homeless or unstably housed adults.



## WHERE TO CONNECT WITH PEER SUPPORT SERVICES

### Optum San Diego:

- Mobile Crisis Response Teams (MCRT): In-person crisis intervention by behavioral health experts, an alternative to law enforcement involvement.

### Vista Hill Foundation:

- Connect Adult: Parent peer model that offers support and education to families of at-risk children.

### Clubhouses:

Provide social and vocational support for people with mental illness within a community setting.

- The Plaza Clubhouses (NAMI) - South Region
- The Meeting Place Clubhouse - Central Region
- Casa Del Centro Clubhouse (NAMI) - Central Region
- East Corner Clubhouse (CRF) - East Region
- Mariposa Clubhouse (TURN) - North Coastal Region
- East Wind Clubhouse (UPAC) - North Central Region
- Escondido Clubhouse (TURN) - North Inland Region

### **Specialized Clubhouses:**

- Connection 2 Community Clubhouse (NAMI): A non-residential outreach and engagement program for homeless adults with a serious mental health condition.
- Deaf Community Services Clubhouse (DCS): Provides a safe member-operated recovery and skill development center for deaf, hard-of-hearing, deaf-blind, and late deafened persons at risk for or living with mental health challenges.
- Oasis Clubhouse (Pathways Community Services): Provides a safe, positive, and dynamic environment where transition-age youth (TAY) can learn valuable skills, give and receive support, and connect with peers who have similar life experiences.

### **Specialty and Community-Based Programs:**

- [San Diego Refugee Communities Coalition Behavioral Health Program](#): Offers peer support and resource navigation with a focus on cultural and medical needs.
- [Courage to Call](#): Veteran-run support network providing resources and assistance to military families.
- [Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance](#): Peer-led support groups for individuals with mood disorders.
- [Elder Multicultural Access and Support Services](#): Provides elder-focused services, including education, peer counseling, and support.
- [LGBT National Youth Talkline, Q Chat Space, and The Trevor Project – TrevorSpace](#): Provides support and resources for LGBT youth.
- [Wounded Warrior Project Peer Support Groups](#): Focuses on peer groups for the needs of injured service members.
- [San Diego Youth Services Peer Support Services](#): Utilizes lived experience to assist youth in improving social functioning and overall quality of life.

# Conclusion

The findings presented in this report underscore the transformative power of peer support in the realm of behavioral health. Throughout the pages, the stories, data, and insights collectively illustrate peer counselors' profound impact on individuals and communities. This conclusion synthesizes the key points and suggests actionable next steps to enhance and expand peer support services.

### Key Findings:

- **Effectiveness of Peer Programs:** Peer programs such as NAMI Next Steps and PeerLINKS have demonstrated significant improvements in mental health outcomes, reducing hospital readmissions and fostering stronger community connections. These programs not only address immediate mental health needs, but also provide sustainable support systems that empower individuals on their recovery journeys.
- **Personal Stories of Recovery:** The personal narratives within this report highlight the deeply human aspect of peer support. Stories like Alex's illustrate the critical role that peer counselors play in instilling hope and providing tailored support that resonates on a personal level. These accounts bring to life the statistical evidence, showing how peer support can be a beacon of hope for those navigating mental health challenges.
- **Insights from Peer Counselors:** Peer counselors offer unique perspectives based on their lived experiences, which are invaluable in providing empathetic and effective support. Their voices call for better support structures, adequate compensation, and increased recognition of their contributions. They emphasize the importance of empathy, shared experiences, and continuous professional development in delivering high-quality peer support.
- **Implementation and Utilization:** Successful peer support programs require comprehensive strategies for recruitment, training, and integration into behavioral health services. Organizations must adopt best practices in these areas to maximize the impact of peer support and ensure that peer counselors are well-equipped to meet the diverse needs of their clients.



PHOTO CREDIT: MARISOL BENITEZ  
VIA CANVA

## CONCLUSION

### Future Actions:

- **Expand Peer Support Services:** Given the proven effectiveness of peer support, it is imperative to expand these services across more behavioral health programs. This includes increasing the number of trained peer counselors and integrating peer support into a broader range of healthcare settings.
- **Enhance Training and Professional Development:** Developing robust training programs that cover essential competencies such as active listening, empathy, crisis intervention, and cultural sensitivity is crucial. Continuous professional development opportunities should be provided to keep peer counselors updated on best practices and emerging research.
- **Promote Organizational Culture of Inclusivity:** Organizations must foster a culture that values and respects the contributions of peer counselors. This involves educating all staff about the role and potential of peer support, challenging existing stigmas, and encouraging collaboration across different levels of the organization.
- **Increase Compensation and Career Pathways:** Fair compensation and clear career advancement opportunities are essential for retaining and motivating peer counselors. Organizations should create pathways for career growth, such as supervisory roles or specialized areas of support, to acknowledge and reward peer counselors' hard work and dedication.
- **Measure Outcomes and Impact:** Developing methods to measure the outcomes and impact of peer support services is vital for continuous improvement. Tracking client satisfaction, recovery outcomes, and the effectiveness of peer interventions will help justify the investment in peer support programs and highlight areas for further development.
- **Community Outreach and Engagement:** Conduct public awareness campaigns to raise awareness about peer services, their benefits, and how to access them. Collaborate with local community organizations to reach diverse populations and integrate peer support into various community settings.
- **Leverage Technology and Innovation:** Utilize telehealth platforms to provide peer support remotely, increasing accessibility for individuals in rural or underserved areas. Develop and distribute digital resources such as apps, online support groups, and informational websites to complement in-person services.
- **Advocate for Policy Support:** Engage in policy advocacy to support the integration and funding of peer services at the local, state, and national levels. Building relationships with stakeholders, including policymakers, healthcare providers, and community leaders, is essential for garnering support for peer services.

### Conclusion:

The evidence presented in this report clearly demonstrates that peer support is a powerful tool in the field of behavioral health. By expanding and enhancing peer support services, we can continue transforming lives, fostering resilience, and building stronger communities. The next steps outlined here provide a roadmap for maximizing the impact of peer support, ensuring that these services remain a vital part of the mental health care landscape. Together, we can continue to build a supportive community that shines brightly with hope and promise.

# Learn More about Peer Support

[\*\*A Providers Handbook On Developing And Implementing Peer Roles \(Peers for Progress\)\*\*](#): This handbook is aimed at helping organizations develop and implement peer support roles effectively. It acknowledges various motivations for adopting peer support, including perceived benefits, organizational directives, and compliance with regulations. Over the past 15 years, numerous programs have experimented with and researched peer support roles, offering valuable insights into what works and what doesn't. The manual's objectives include offering best practices in peer support, sharing tips gleaned from other programs' experiences, and providing a practical toolbox ("Nuts and Bolts") for organizations to utilize in their implementation efforts.

[\*\*Core Competencies for Peer Workers \(Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \[SAMHSA\]\)\*\*](#): Peer workers and peer recovery support services have gained prominence in aiding individuals living with or recovering from mental and/or substance use disorders. Community-based organizations led by peer workers have also emerged as significant contributors to facilitating recovery journeys. The recognition of the necessity for core competencies among both mental health consumers and individuals in recovery from substance use disorders has led to active participation from both communities in the development of these competencies for peer support workers.

[\*\*Issue Brief - Expanding Peer Support and Supporting the Peer Workforce in Mental Health \(SAMHSA\)\*\*](#): The issue brief provides important insights for State Mental Health Authorities (SMHA) regarding the advantages of peer support and the integration of peer workers across the behavioral health spectrum. It emphasizes the significance of incorporating peer support workers into service delivery for mental health and co-occurring disorders, such as substance use disorder (SUD). The document outlines existing standards and best practices, underscoring the essential role of peer support workers in enhancing service provision and promoting recovery within these populations.

[\*\*National Practice Guidelines for Peer Supporters \(National Association of Peer Support\)\*\*](#): In 2012, the National Association of Peer Support (NAPS) initiated an inclusive process, supported by a panel convened by SAMHSA, to develop practice standards for the emerging field of peer support, laying the groundwork for a potential national credential. Subsequently, in 2019, NAPS introduced an updated version of the National Practice Guidelines (NPG), which now incorporates detailed instructions for supervisors to uphold the core values of peer support. This revised document, titled the National Practice Guidelines for Peer Specialists and Supervisors (NPG-S), provides comprehensive guidance for both peer specialists and their supervisors, further enhancing the professionalism and effectiveness of peer support services.

[\*\*Peer Support Mental Health Services: Promoting Person-Centered and Rights-Based Approaches \(World Health Organization\)\*\*](#): This document is a component of the World Health Organization (WHO) guidance and technical packages on community mental health services series. It features various peer support mental health services aimed at fostering hope, sharing experiences, empowerment, and upholding legal capacity while avoiding coercive practices. This document offers detailed guidance for establishing new peer support mental health services that prioritize and safeguard human rights.

## LEARN MORE ABOUT PEER SUPPORT

### [Peer Support Workers for those in Recovery \(SAHMSA\):](#)

Peer workers and peer recovery support services are now pivotal in assisting individuals in coping with or overcoming mental and/or substance use disorders. Community-based organizations, spearheaded by peer workers, are increasingly influential in aiding individuals in their recovery journeys. Both mental health consumers and those recovering from substance use disorders have acknowledged the necessity for core competencies in this field. Consequently, both communities have actively engaged in the development of these core competencies for peer support workers.

[Peer-to-Peer Class \(NAMI Peer-to-Peer\):](#) NAMI Peer-to-Peer is a complimentary, eight-session educational initiative tailored for adults grappling with mental health conditions that aims to enhance self-awareness and recovery comprehension. Led by trained facilitators with lived experience, the program integrates activities, discussions, and informative videos. Notably, akin to all NAMI programs, it refrains from offering treatment recommendations. NAMI Peer-to-Peer fosters a secure, confidential setting, nurturing mutual support and personal development. Participants can expect compassion and empathy from peers who understand their journey, fostering an environment conducive to learning and acceptance in the realm of recovery.

### [Resources and Support for Peers: Becoming a Peer Support Specialist \(Mental Health America Peer Resources\):](#)

Peers contribute to others' lives by providing hope, serving as recovery role models, offering coaching, fostering engagement, and facilitating connections. They recognize the entirety of an individual and understand that recovery extends beyond mere "symptom management." The essential mutuality inherent in peer support ensures that both the giver and receiver of support benefit from the relationship. As the field of peer support in behavioral health expands, new challenges and growth opportunities emerge. The Center for Peer Support serves as a valuable repository of information and resources for those interested in peer support and for peers themselves to utilize.

# PEER CONNECTIONS

A 2024 Special Report  
on Peer Services in San Diego County

**Health Services Research Center**  
Herbert Wertheim School of Public Health and Human Longevity Science  
University of California San Diego

The Health Services Research Center supports research focused on understanding how clinical and treatment services affect health outcomes.



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