Garnering the Power of Peers: Development of a Peer Support Program in SCI

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Disclosures

• J. Brundage, PhD has no financial interest to disclose.

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Learning Objectives

• At the conclusion of this activity, the participant will be able to:

  1. Define peer support, peer support provider, and the nature of a peer support relationship.
  2. Understand the utility of peer support providers in SCI.
  3. Describe the structure and procedures of a peer support program for Veterans with spinal cord injury and disorders (SCI/D) that aligns with current standards in the field of peer support.

_The bottom line: Equipping SCI providers with the knowledge and tools they will need to create or revamp peer support programs within the SCI system of care may ultimately fill a critical gap in support services and positively impact consumers of these services._
Our Starting Point

- No formal program
- No training or supervision for those identifying themselves as “peers”
- Worry about the implications of this

- Knew we needed a program in order to adhere to VHA HANDBOOK 1176.01: SPINAL CORD INJURY AND DISORDERS (SCI/D) SYSTEM OF CARE

j. Peer Counseling Services, Programs, and Referrals. Peer counseling services and programs are provided directly or through referrals to Veterans Service Organizations (VSO), community-based peer counseling programs, etc. VA or community-based peer counseling programs assist Veterans with SCI/D and their family adjust to new onset disability; understand the rehabilitation process; develop new social skills and relationships; and transition to community living. Peer counselors serve as role models by sharing experiences and practical suggestions regarding living with a disability, listening to the concerns of the individual, and responding in such a way as to facilitate the rehabilitation process and enhance quality of life.
Background & Implementation of Peer Support in VA

- Peer support is a vital component of Uniform Mental Health Services Handbook 1160.01 and Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Handbook 1163.01
- Soon became evident that the aim was to implement a profession, not a program
- Guided by President’s New Freedom Commission (2003) and two public laws that:
  - Advocated for involvement of consumers in providing recovery-oriented services and support
  - Defined “peer” and required certification training
- 2006 & again in 2007: $2.5 million was granted to create peer support positions in VA (approx. 130 hired by 2008)
- White House Executive Order, August 2012: Hire and train 800 peer support staff
- Accomplishments: 973 peers hired; new PDs; new stop code; new person class
Defining (VA) Peer Support Services

Q: What is peer support?
A: A system of giving and receiving help founded on the key principles of respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement of what is helpful. It is a process dedicated to promoting empowerment and self-determination in the service of recovery.

Q: Who are peer support providers?
A: A person with a disorder(s) who has been trained to help others with the same/similar disorder(s) identify and achieve specific life and recovery goals. A peer support provider is actively engaged in his/her own recovery. S/he may volunteer or be hired to provide peer support services.

Q: What is the purpose of a peer support program?
A: To provide opportunities for Veterans to take control of their own recovery
A: To teach and support the learning of skills needed to facilitate one’s recovery
A: To make Veterans aware of available services and choices
A: To help Veterans develop a sense of wellness and self-worth
A: To bring a unique perspective to the treatment teams on which they work
Core Functions of Peer Support

1. **Assistance in daily management**
   Peer specialists use their own experiences in helping people figure out how to progress in their daily lives. They can also help in identifying key resources and connect with them.

2. **Social and emotional support**
   Through empathetic listening and encouragement, peer specialists are an integral part of helping Veterans to cope with social or emotional barriers and to stay motivated to reach their goals.

3. **Linkages to clinical care and community resources**
   Peer specialists can help bridge the gap between the Veterans and health professionals and encourage individuals to seek out clinical and community resources when it is appropriate.

4. **Ongoing support, extended over time**
   Peer specialists keep Veterans successfully engaged by providing proactive, flexible, and continual long-term follow-up.

These functions align with the VHA Handbook’s description of SCI peer services noting they are provided “to assist Veterans with SCI/D and their family adjust to new onset disability; understand the rehabilitation process; develop new social skills and relationships; and transition to community living.”
## Correcting Misperceptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PEERS DO</th>
<th>PEERS DON’T</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Act as role models of recovery</td>
<td>Provide psychotherapy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Share their own recovery stories</td>
<td>Do other people’s jobs/fulfill other people’s roles in the facility</td>
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<td>Facilitate peer support groups</td>
<td>Collude with consumers against clinical staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advocate for consumers</td>
<td>Cross boundaries</td>
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<tr>
<td>Act as a liaison between staff and consumers</td>
<td>Support consumers in their self-destructive and/or illegal behaviors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communicate with clinical staff</td>
<td>Criticize clinical staff in front of consumers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belong to a multidisciplinary team</td>
<td>Serve as a “mini-therapist” or junior clinician</td>
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<td>Provide outreach and inreach</td>
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Benefits of Peer Support Services

• Research has shown a range of benefits of peer support on patients including:
  – True empathy
  – Less inpatient use
  – More time and engagement with the community
  – Better treatment engagement
  – Greater satisfaction with life
  – Greater quality of life
  – Greater hopefulness
  – Better social functioning
  – Fewer problems and needs

• The peer support relationship also contains a unique combination of supportive components not replicated in other SCI patient-provider relationships, particularly the “lived experience”

as cited in Chinman, Henze, & Sweeney, 2013; Veith et al., 2006
Significance for SCI Practice

- Peer support is a vital strategy for health promotion and a powerful complement to the team-based approach, a core function of both SCI rehabilitation and continuing care.
- Peer services are also growing in importance for CARF Accreditation and Joint Commission Behavioral Health Care Accreditation.
  - CARF Medical Rehabilitation Standards Manual
  - 3.A.7 example: Peer support might facilitate successful life transitions, adjustment to disability, and awareness of and access to community resources, advocacy groups, and activities.
  - SCI Standards 3.J.10: The SCI system of care provides a peer counseling program that reflects the characteristics of the persons served.

SCI providers should be aware of pertinent training and certification standards in order to create peer support programs that align with evidence-based peer support practices that relate to positive health outcomes in the patients they serve.
The Peer Support Profession

- **International Association of Peers Supporters (iNAPS) Ethical Guidelines and Practice Standards**
- **Certification**
  - Hired VA peers must be certified within a year, either state certification or attendance at VA-contract training (2 weeks in length, hybrid online and in-person)
  - States are reworking education and training requirements, becoming more defined
  - WI now requires attendance at a state-approved Peer Specialist Training as well as the passing of the Certification Exam which is offered 3x/year
  - Additional twist: revamping training curriculum and not offering trainings in coming months
  - Has been a challenge for us!
(VA) Peer Support Competencies

- Recovery Principles
- Peer Support Practices
- Communication
- Recovery and Personal Wellness Goals
- Whole Health Approach to Services
- Managing Crisis and Emergency Situations
- Community Integration/Reintegration
- Group Facilitation
- Advocacy
- Use of Recovery Tools
- Workplace Skills
- Professional Development

VHA Handbook 1163.05: Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Services Peer Support
Our Program: Recruitment of Peers

- Must be:
  - In “recovery” for at least 12 months
  - Willing to obtain volunteer status at our facility
  - Willing to work toward state certification (if not already obtained)
  - Willing to attend weekly training sessions

* Peer Support Providers usually cannot work in the same program where they are currently receiving services; however, this is not possible in SCI as our peers continue to be served by our Center. Our workaround includes having the primary supervisor not serve as the primary SCI psychology provider.
Our Program

• Linking in with larger peer support education and training provided at our VAMC
  – Includes weekly 1.5 hour didactic training sessions that encompass education, case presentations, professional development activities, and learning about local resources
• Supervision
• Getting buy-in from staff
• Started with rehab patients and others who could benefit

• State-certified
• WOC employees
• Full integration with treatment team including attendance at team meetings and documentation in the medical record
• Pipe dream: FTE (or 2!)
Guiding VA Documents

- VHA Handbook 1176.01: Spinal Cord Injury and Disorders (SCI/D) System of Care
- VHA Handbook 1160.01: Uniform Mental Health Services
- VHA Handbook 1163.01: Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery
- VHA Handbook 1163.05: Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Services Peer Support

- Peer Specialist Toolkit: Implementing Peer Support Services in VHA
  - Can be accessed via the MHS Peer Support Specialist Sharepoint
References

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http://PVA.cds.pesgce.com