

Preparing to Integrate Consumer Workers at Your Agency

Agencies that have successfully integrated peers, or consumer workers, into their workforce have planned carefully and thought through a series of considerations:

Articulate the benefits that consumer workers bring to the agency. Know how peer-delivered services will enhance your agency's mission and the goals of your program, and share this information with leadership, employees, and other stakeholders.

Review your policies to make sure they can be applied broadly and flexibly to peer employees. For example, if all staff are expected to be trained in and abide by HIPAA and other confidentiality laws, employees in peer roles should also be subject to such policies. Avoid creating special policies just for peers if possible; instead, consider how to ensure policies can be reworked to account for special circumstances, such as flexible sick time for peer employees who may need to attend frequent medical appointments.

Orient staff to the benefits of peer employees and the roles they will play. Build buy-in from staff by communicating clearly about how peers will be employed, how they will support the work of the agency, and how they will be trained and supported.

Plan for clearly delineated peer job duties and workflows. Ensure that the peer employee and other staff throughout the agency know what the peer will be doing, how their role is distinct from other roles, and how people in other roles will be interacting with and supporting the peer.

Anticipate common questions and concerns from other employees. Sometimes staff may express concerns about consumer workers' ability or willingness to abide by the rules of professional conduct. Frequent concerns include confidentiality, boundaries, and peers' effects on the relationships other staff have forged with the clients. Be prepared to describe the training that peer employees will receive (both as part of their certification process and through your agency). Share information regarding how the peer will be oriented to the agency's policies and their role. Emphasize the other structures, such as supportive supervision, that will be in place to support the peer.

Create a comprehensive onboarding process for peer employees. Introduce them to other members of the organization beyond the colleagues on their team. Ensure peers attend the same trainings and other meetings that your agency requires of all new employees. Devote time to ensuring that the peer understands agency policies and procedures, and the roles of other departments and staff, as well as their own job duties. Remember that even if a peer employee is currently or has previously been a client of your agency, they may not fully understand the relationships between departments.

Recognize the implications of accepting employment for peer employees' public assistance benefits. Peers' public assistance benefits may be decreased or eliminated when they accept any paid employment. This can cause enormous stress, and in some cases peers may leave their jobs. Supervisors and HR staff should be oriented to these implications. The AIDS Institute's [Benefits Pilot Program](#) can assist peers in knowing what to expect in advance or manage an unexpected situation.

Consider long-term planning and professional growth for peer employees. By their nature, many consumer worker roles are entry-level. Yet, peer employees often develop substantial expertise over time; many aspire to move into roles with additional responsibilities and/or to further their education after certification (for example through the college credits available to Certified Peer Workers through Empire State College). Consider whether your agency will eventually allow certified peers who meet certain criteria to be promoted into other types of full- or part-time roles.

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