



HIRING GUIDELINES FOR PEER SPECIALISTS

A peer specialist is an employee who will bring added value to your organization. The interview process is a vital step in ensuring that the applicant is a good match to the needs of the organization. The guidance below¹ may be helpful in exploring how to integrate peer specialists into your practice.

Advertising the Position

Be clear about who you are looking for. Sample language in the job advertisement include:

- Past or present consumer of mental health services
- Must self-identify as a consumer of mental health services
- Must have personal experience with recovery

Give a contact person and phone number rather than a place to send applications in the ad. This will give you a chance to screen applicants to save time. Many people do not understand the concept of the position and will be calling as a provider or family member to apply. A phone contact will give you the opportunity to quickly screen out applicants without the lived experience qualification. It will save time and energy down the road.

“Lived Experience” with Psychiatric Diagnoses

Human resources departments often have concerns about asking about a person’s lived experience due to ADA prohibitions against asking about a person’s disability status. The interviewer actually can ask about the person’s history when there is a “bona fide occupational qualification (BFOQ).” There are a number of ways to explore an individual’s experiences through interview questions like those listed here:

- Can you tell me some ways that you might use your personal lived experience to support the people you’d be working with? *(Their answer should include ideas around “inspiring hope,” and around connecting with people from the place of shared experience and the tools or strategies that the person used to move to a better place.)*
- Tell me about your personal and professional background as it relates to this position. *(Their answer should include something about the value of bringing “lived experience” to the job.)*
- Do you have any life experiences that would make you valuable to this program?
- What is your experience with primary care clinics and the mental health system? *(In order to say, “been there, done that,” the person needs more points of commonality with people using services than simply having received a diagnosis.)*
- Do you have any experience working with people who have been diagnosed with a mental health condition? *(May bring out volunteer work or other activities not highlighted on the application or resume.)*
- What role has peer support had in your own recovery? *(If the person is not familiar with or has not utilized peer support, they are probably not a good candidate.)*

1. Some questions adapted from “Forum on Integrating Peer Services in Community and Inpatient Settings in Vermont’s Mental Health System of Care” (Bluebird & Dixon).



Evaluating Peer Skills

Peer specialist certification requirements vary across the United States. Below are sample interview questions that can help you understand the applicant's skills and experience as a peer specialist regardless of your state's requirements.

- How would you define a peer specialist and how would you describe the key role and tasks? *(Their answer should include mutuality, sharing mutual experience, non-expert role, supporting people to become self-determining, inspire hope, etc. Their answer should NOT be about "making people better," "counseling people," etc.)*
- Part of the role of a peer support worker is to model recovery by sharing some of your own experiences. Would you be comfortable doing so?
- What do you know about the concept of "recovery?" What is your personal knowledge of this, and how did you come to this understanding? *(Their answer should include mental health recovery, not just 12-step substance use recovery. Concept described should include values of potential for everyone to recover.)*
- If you were working with someone who has become resigned to the idea that their life will always be limited because of a psychiatric condition, how would you try to support that person? *(Their answer should include sharing personal experiences, sharing mutual feelings, sharing tools, and NOT telling the person that, of course, it will get better or giving them advice such as, "well, if you'd do.... you'd have a better chance...")*
- In many ways, the peer position role is a pioneering role. What skills will you bring to the job that will allow you to advocate for people while being in partnership with other staff members? *(Their answer should include using personal story to demonstrate the experience from the perspective of using services. They should also include something about respectful communication to everyone. An excellent response would include something about negotiating power and conflict.)*
- Peer specialists are often considered to be "change agents" within organizations. How will your experiences help you to be a change agent, and how would you see this happening? *(Their answer may include anything about being able to share personal experiences with staff to give them more understanding of the experience from the service user's perspective and sharing alternative approaches from the self-help community that augments the work of clinicians (like WRAP), etc. If this notion is a shock to the applicant, probably not a good match. They may see the role as a mini-clinician, and this perspective will detract from the value of the role.)*
- Some staff here may be apprehensive about or unsupportive of peer support. How would you deal with this?
- If you were in a situation where you were called to help deescalate a situation with a client, how would you respond in that situation?
- A big part of what peer specialists do is advocate for clients on a low level. You may need to address staff on their approach with clients. Tell us more about your ability to speak up in difficult or intimidating situations.



Assessing Skills as an Employee

Peer specialist certification requirements vary across the United States. Below are sample interview questions that can help you understand the applicant's skills and experience as a peer specialist regardless of your state's requirements.

- This position will require you to work in _____ (identify settings, like inpatient, emergency room, day treatment setting, residential setting, a setting where restraints are sometimes used, etc.). How will your personal lived experience support your work in this/these settings? *(Their answer should include peer strategies, even if the person's own experience didn't include the particular setting. If someone says that their experience was very painful, that they can't think of any strategies because they don't believe in that kind of treatment, or say anything to indicate that they would be uncomfortable in the setting, it would probably be a bad match.)*
- While working here you may be a part of some situations that disturb you or make you feel uncomfortable. How do you think you would handle these situations, both when they occur and after the situation has ended?
- If you felt your job was causing an increase in your stress level, what would you do? *(Their answer should include seeking supervision and NOT include anything about going to other staff in a "patient" kind of way.)*
- Can you tell me about your history of dependability in prior positions or, if no recent positions, in other activities in your life? *(You CAN ask this. You CAN NOT ask history of hospitalizations, history of taking medical leave, or when someone was "last sick.")*
- Do you function better with the independence to create your own work structure or work better with a clear structure?
- Some people are here because they have been found not criminally responsible for serious crimes. Those crimes range from theft and arson to rape and murder. Some may have been high profile and you may have read or heard some pretty outrageous things about them in the media. What are your thoughts and feelings on working with these people?
- Have you ever experienced a conflict with a co-worker in the past? How did you handle it, or, if not, how do you think you would handle it?
- Other peer specialists have said that the amount of social interaction can be very draining. How have you been able to manage your stress in the past?



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Proficiencies of a Peer Specialist

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- ☐ Believes that everyone can recover
- ☐ Values choice and self-determination
- ☐ Can describe the peer specialist role in relation to both people using services and those providing services
- ☐ Values the peer role as a new non-clinical position to augment and not duplicate traditional services
- ☐ Recognizes the relationship of the peer specialist role to the peer and self-help movement
- ☐ Feels comfortable "standing up" for people being served but with respectful communication
- ☐ Recognizes the importance of hope in recovery and motivation to change
- ☐ Can describe recovery through the use of personal story
- ☐ Knows how to use personal story to describe strategies used to make steps in recovery
- ☐ Can describe elements of a recovery-oriented health approach and can describe things within the health care system that hinder the recovery process

Note: Like many other professionals who choose to work in the "helping" professions, peer specialists often come to this work because of the personal gratification gained from the work. However, the role of work in the person's own recovery and wellness should not be part of the hiring process, any more than it would be for any other position.

Adapted from "Hiring Guidelines for Peer Specialists" by Lyn Legere, The Transformation Center