



# UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

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## PEER SUPPORT:

### A VALUED PART OF RECOVERY, WELLNESS AND HEALTH REFORM

#### TOPIC.

Peer support is an increasingly important element in the diagnosis, treatment and recovery from mental and substance use disorders. While only coming to public and professional consciousness relatively recently, peer support is not a new phenomenon in behavioral health. It actually has its roots in self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, founded in 1935, Narcotics Anonymous and the mental health consumer movement that has been a growing national voice and presence for decades.

The peer support movement has helped demonstrate that recovery from behavioral disorders is an achievable, sustainable goal. It has helped place behavioral illnesses alongside other chronic, treatable illnesses, such as heart disease and diabetes. And, the peer support movement has helped SAMHSA establish a new working definition of recovery: *A process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential.* The use of the term “wellness” in this context is critical.

Peer support isn't just a movement; it's a way of delivering care. Specially trained individuals with mental or substance use disorders extend services to others with these disorders, using both their training and their personal experience of the journey of recovery. In many ways, it is much like the peer navigator who works with people with breast or prostate cancer, or with diabetes or heart disease. Each acts as a model of recovery in action.

Peer support has been determined to be an evidence-based practice based on its research-confirmed value as an essential component of care to support and sustain recovery. In fact, in 2007, it was recognized by CMS as a practice that is to be reimbursed under Medicaid. And, given current challenges and opportunities related to the Affordable Care Act (ACA) implementation, to integrating care and to promoting a wellness culture, the role of peer support has never been more important.

#### ANALYSIS.

The very opportunities brought about by the ACA's public health focus also represent challenges for behavioral health providers, consumers and peer supporters. The foremost challenge relates to adoption of a “whole person” perspective in care, treatment and recovery.

It's a critical issue for the people we serve. Too many people with mental and substance use disorders die up to 25 years earlier than others in their age cohort. They're dying because they have nearly double the average risk for physical illnesses. They experience more risk factors for these disorders due to lifestyle factors (e.g., tobacco use), medication-related factors (e.g., metabolic syndrome in obesity), and the lack of treatment for chronic care conditions (e.g., heart disease). That's because most lack health insurance because they're unemployed, or living below the poverty level or are homeless. Even when care is sought, it may be inadequate or incomplete due to poor coordination between behavioral and primary health care, stigma and discrimination. And, given their more urgent care needs, preventive care is often an afterthought, at best. In addition to the tragedy of early death, it should also be noted that these co-occurring behavioral and physical illnesses also result in much higher health care costs.

**The Challenge:** The challenge for us is to adopt a wellness model into our services concurrent with our work to integrate care across behavioral and physical health. Indeed, the wellness model—one that works with individual consumers to help them do better self-care—actually represents a simple, practical application of the ACA's whole health model that integrates the care of all of our parts. This model can be facilitated through peer support which can become a critical component of this changed view of how health care is provided.

Peer support has done a good job of working from the inside out, focusing on behavioral health care and recovery from mental and substance use disorders. Peer support services have become a growing and integral part of the arc of services available to people with these disorders. Building from behavioral health to primary care has erected the first tower of the suspension bridge that carries people from illness to wellness. But one tower can only get you halfway across the river. And so, with the clear public health imperative to adopt a whole person approach that emphasizes both physical and behavioral wellness, it is not time to stop working. It is time to build a new strategy—that second tower of the bridge—to meet the challenges ahead. That requires building from other river bank—from primary care toward the center—to create a whole bridge that joins body and brain.

**Meeting the Challenge:** The good news is that the drive toward a whole person approach—a wellness approach—in care and recovery is more than an idea. Several centers of activity are taking shape in a variety of venues. The second tower—the primary care tower—is actually being built. For example, the World Health Organization’s non-communicable disease initiative has identified the role that behavioral disorders play in cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes and respiratory conditions. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has launched the Million Hearts Initiative, focused on saving one million lives from cardiac disease in 5 years. At least one-third of these saved lives can be people with behavioral disorders who are at heightened risk. And, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is focusing on strategic public health interventions to promote positive behavioral health and wellness. SAMHSA, for its part, continues its Wellness Initiative, collaborating with FDA, HRSA and other HHS agencies to help reduce premature death among people with behavioral health problems.

Implementation of the ACA provides a unique opportunity to build that second tower of the bridge, given its emphasis on prevention and integrated care, community support and wrap-around services. But, as with other aspects of health reform, the vast majority of the work needs to take place in the trenches, in the community care settings because that is where wellness begins. And peer support is essential to the adoption of patient-centered, whole health centered care that is the foundation of the second tower of the suspension bridge to achieve recovery and wellness. Peer support can be engaged successfully in each area of ACA-related reform:

✓ ***In insurance reform, acting as***

- Insurance and access navigators to help 10.5 million with mental and substance use disorders enroll in and access services through either Medicaid or the State Exchanges.
- Care navigators to engage people with mental and substance use disorders in care and recovery services.
- Advocators to promote inclusion of peer supports in the new insurance plans.

✓ ***In coverage reform, acting as***

- Education navigators to educate consumers and their families about changes in insurance coverage.
- Advocators to inform insurers about populations and elements of prevention and wellness that should be included as elements of quality care.

✓ ***In quality reform, acting as***

- Health home navigators to help create appropriate health homes and to help those with behavioral disorders enroll in them.
- ACO navigators to take a lead in forming ACO cooperatives, thereby helping to ensure that ACOs include all appropriate behavioral health components.
- Advocators to provide input on developing and using recovery-related performance measures.

✓ ***In payment reform, acting as***

- Payment navigators to help insurance plans develop case/capitation systems that promote recovery.
- Advocators to help innovate in case/capitation systems, such as creation of peer-directed capitation system.

✓ ***In IT reform, acting as***

- IT navigators to help people with behavioral disorders better understand the role of EHRs in coordinating care and monitoring care.
- Advocators to promote creation and use of peer-controlled personal health records promoting self-direction and improved care.

Can needed change be accomplished without peer support and peer support services? Unlikely. Without peer support it will not be the kind of change that works in the best interest of the people we serve in our communities. Moreover, peer support makes not only wellness sense but also financial sense. It provides services much more efficiently and effectively at reduced cost.

## **ACTION STEPS.**

Transforming healthcare demands a greater focus on a whole person approach, a wellness approach, which extends from prevention through recovery. This transformation can be better realized by embracing the role peer support services can play not only in promoting recovery, but also in the broad array of health and wellness services. And, just like other ACA-related changes underway as we move toward a system of more informed, more public health-oriented and more integrated health care, it begins at home in your county.

To that end, we suggest some steps you should take to advance the important role peer support services have in advancing and sustaining recovery from behavioral disorders AND in promoting wellness in each of its eight dimensions (emotional, financial, social, spiritual, occupational, physical, intellectual and environmental).

- Increase your dialogue with the peer community where you live to engage them as active collaborators in the wellness role to be played by peer support services.
- Plan how to increase the number of peer support personnel on board in your programs and how they can best be deployed.
- Identify means (both dollars and programs) of training the next generation of peer support personnel as an important element of the future of community-based behavioral health care.
- Engage actively in SAMHSA's Wellness Initiative by becoming a community partner and mobilizing your community to advance the eight dimensions of wellness.
- Assess and evaluate the human and economic benefits of your peer support services in terms of improved health outcomes, employment, and overall wellness.
- Work to make peer support services part of your State's essential health benefits under the ACA.

Peer support services can help build that second tower of the bridge, completing the span to wellness people with behavioral disorders.

*For more information about peer support services:*

- SAMHSA's Wellness initiative website at: <http://www.promoteacceptance.samhsa.gov/10by10/default.aspx>
- Pillars of Peer Support Services initiative website at: <http://www.pillarsofpeersupport.org/about.php>.

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