



Supporting Certified Peer Specialists of Color

Recommendations for Peer Support Organizations

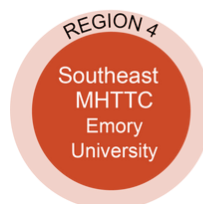
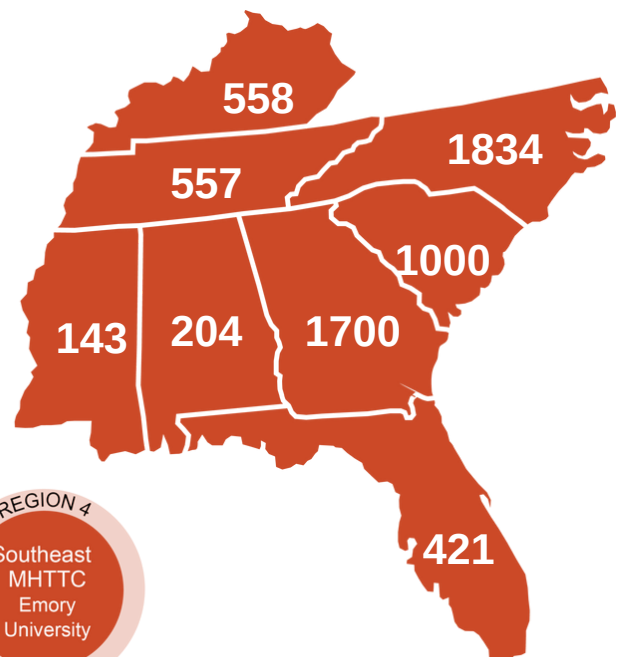
Role of Certified Peer Specialists

Given their shared lived experiences, **Certified Peer Specialists (CPS)** are crucial in offering mutually beneficial support to peers who are recovering from psychiatric and/or substance use disorders.¹The emotional and interpersonal understanding between a peer and CPS is crucial in the recovery journey. ²

A 2016 national survey of the peer support workforce gathered a range of demographics such as gender, age, ethnoracial background, education, religion/spiritual preference, and region amongst others. Of the 597 respondents almost 75% identified as White, 15% identified as Black, 9.7% as Hispanic/Latinx, 4.6% identify as Indigenous or Alaskan Native, 3.7% as Mixed, and 0.7% as Asian.⁵ There are roughly **two times less** Latinx peer workers than there are in the overall population in the United States, according to demographic data. Black CPS demographics are comparable to the general U.S. demographics. ⁶

Peers Serving in Southeastern States

- **Approximately 30,000 people are actively serving as a CPS in the U.S.**
- **More than 6,400 CPS serve in the Southeast region (as of 2016).**^{3,4}



Challenges Experienced by CPS

Evidence shows that CPS experience workplace discrimination due to feeling **underappreciated** for their contributions to the behavioral health workforce by other non-peer professionals and **do not feel valued** for their unique experiences and perspective.^{7,8} Stigmas are placed against CPS regarding their capacity to perform such important peer work due to their complicated mental health and/or substance use histories.⁹

Examples include:^{10,11}

- **Negative messaging like clinicians joking about a CPS being a “patient”**
- **Being excluded from social aspect of workplace culture**
- **Assumption that CPS are “too fragile” to handle the stress of mental health settings**
- **A lack of trust amongst non-peer staff because of a CPS’ prior lived experiences**



Influence of Structural Racism, Discrimination, & Cultural Mistrust^{1,12-14}

Structural racism – the embedded policies, practices, attitudes, and cultural representations in society that reinforces inequitable distributions of power – **exacerbates mental health stigmas** and the lack of appreciation for CPS of color by layering race- and ethnicity-based discrimination. People of color face derogatory stereotypes that equate one’s ethnoracial background to psychologically being inferior to the dominant race, i.e., White identifying people. Adequate and fair behavioral health resources have historically been **inaccessible** to people of color, particularly those who identify as Black. As a result, the demeaning messaging that CPS’ receive is significantly more demoralizing for CPS of color.

Because of the ever-present racism embedded in society, communities of color struggle to trust systems with histories of repurposing race-based discrimination – this lack of trust is known as **cultural mistrust**.¹⁵

Negative Messaging + Structural Racism + Cultural Mistrust = Unsupported CPS of Color

Why CPS of Color are Important

Certified Peer Specialists are crucial for both peer recovery **and** behavioral health organizations because they offer a distinctive perspective, allow for improvement in cultural sensitivity, and increase the relationship peers have with the behavioral health system amongst others.^{16,17} CPS of color have a unique role in mitigating lived experiences that **may have influences** from race-based discrimination and inspire change in their respective organization. However, the onus **is not** on CPS to ensure the reality of necessary improvements.

Unique Factors to Consider for Each Community

Asian, Pacific Islander, Desi American (APIDA)

Peer support tailored to AAPIDA communities can assist in sorting through the relationship between behavioral health struggles, historical traumas, stigmas, assimilation expectations, and foreigner stereotypes.^{18,19}



American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN)

Peer Recovery Support focused on AI/AN groups can address high rates of substance use and psychological distress while leading with cultural connectedness and spiritual beliefs.²²⁻²⁴



Black/African-American

Peer support tailored to Black communities can address historical dehumanization, violence, traumas, and cultural mistrust that can permeate as poor behavioral health.^{20,21}

Latine

Peer support tailored to Latine communities can help overcome language barriers, highlight the importance of familial support, and counter culturally-specific misconceptions regarding mental health and substance use.²⁵

Recommendations for Supporting CPS of Color

Everyone should be respected, regardless of their race, nationality, culture, religion, sexual orientation, or level of ability. To ensure that all members in your organization feel supported, consider implementing these 6 suggestions:

Recommendation #1: Transparency

Transparency in a professional setting can promote a more inclusive and respectful environment by helping parties recognize and address any biases or stereotypes they may hold.²⁶ Transparency can help organizations track and measure their progress in addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion goals, and can foster greater accountability and trust with clients and the wider community.

Recommendation #2: Allow Space for Improvement

Being resilient and allowing space for growth demonstrates capacity building and keeps your organization up to date. Consider implementing monthly or quarterly listening sessions, cross-hierarchy committees to amplify all voices, and asking for anonymous call for recommendations to help improve the overall organization.

Recommendation #3: Trust

Peers go through extensive training and examination to become certified. By trusting that your peer specialists are there to make a positive impact on others and socially **including** them in the workplace, more CPS will build trust in their respective organizations.

Recommendation #4: Provide a Safe Space

Peer Support organizations in the Southeast can learn from ethno-racial affinity groups to build capacity in supporting the wellbeing of CPS of color and in turn, the strength of their organization. See the next page for examples of affinity groups providing a safe space for CPS of color.²¹

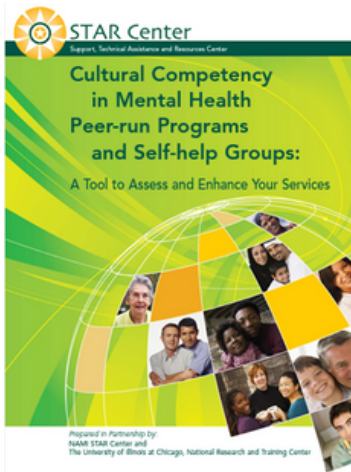
Recommendation #5: Promote Cultural Competency, Humility, & Sensitivity

Take the time to update and enact policies, rules, and regulations that are culturally sensitive, promote humility, and competency. It is crucial to train non-peer staff members on cultural awareness to lessen negative messaging.¹¹

Recommendation #6: Zero Tolerance for Workplace Racism or Discrimination

Take instances of negative messaging, discrimination, and racism seriously. Support minoritized staff by actively listening and validating their experiences and feelings. Consider developing or updating your organization's bias reporting system to document incidents of bias, discrimination, harassment, or hate speech.

Resources for Supporting CPS of Color



Cultural Competency in Mental Health Peer-run Programs and Self-help Groups: This tool is useful in creating action plans to improve cultural competency and sensitivity provided in peer services.

Examples of affinity groups providing a safe space for CPS of color:

- **Black Voices: Pathway 4 Recovery (BV):** Informing the healing, connection, self-empowerment, and reduction of health disparities of Black people with lived experiences of mental health and/or substance use. BV partners with providers, policymakers, and other stakeholders when needed and are ensured personal safety.²⁸
- **Latinos en Acción:** Hosts culturally sensitive networking opportunities and advocacy efforts for Latine peers working in mental health recovery.²⁹
- **Together Empowering Asian Minds (TEAM):** Advocating for Asian Americans experiencing mental health problems and empowering them to speak freely and comfortably through peer support and culturally relevant resources.³⁰



Certified Peer Specialists of color play a crucial role in the behavioral health system by providing support and guidance to individuals who are going through similar experiences.



Their lived experience and unique perspective allow them to connect with others in a way that traditional mental health professionals may not be able to.



It is important to appreciate the work CPS do and provide the resources and recognition they need to continue making a positive impact on the lives of those they serve.

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