



Certified Peer Specialist Experiences During COVID-19

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, several mental health services transitioned to telemental health delivery. This product shares lessons learned and experiences from Certified Peer Specialists (CPS) in their transition to telemental health services. These experiences were collected through a qualitative survey administered by the Southeast MHTTC from August of 2020 through January of 2021 to CPS providing services in Georgia.

Who are CPS?

- Certified Peer Specialists (CPS) are people who have lived experiences with a variety of mental disorders and underwent their own recovery journey. They are trained to provide services that support recovery for people with mental and/or substance use disorders.
- CPS work in a variety of places, including community mental health centers, psychiatric hospitals, rehabilitation centers, community-based organization, and criminal justice settings.

Main Roles of CPS

- Focus on recovery oriented activities
- Incorporate wellness activities
- Connect peers to a variety of different resources
- Help peers cope with COVID-19 related stress



CPS Transition to Telemental Health

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, many mental health centers closed their offices and transitioned to remote service delivery through phone and/or video conferencing. Most of the CPS in this study had limited experience delivering services by phone or video.

CPS reported both **benefits** and **challenges** to telemental health delivery.

Perceived benefits of telehealth services included:

- increased flexibility in scheduling
- increased flexibility in communication styles with peers
- decreased no-show rates
- telehealth delivery worked well for those with limited transportation

CPS felt that increased use of phone and video services enabled more regular communication with their peers. Additionally, for some peers, participating in group sessions from home allowed them to feel more comfortable sharing in group compared to an in-person group setting.

Perceived challenges of telehealth services included:

- diminished feeling of connection between CPS and peers
- experiences of technical and/or connectivity problems
- more distractions within the home setting

CPS reported that offering telehealth services did not work well for peers beginning CPS services or their recovery journey as they were often at increased risk for relapse of substance use or mental disorder symptoms due to social isolation. CPS also reported difficulty in delivering wellness and recovery-oriented activities over a virtual platform, which required creative innovations to overcome the challenges.

“When you’re not face to face with somebody, you can’t read their energy... And so I find it’s really hard to form that connection with peers, especially peers who are just entering the program...”

Factors that **Supported** Peers

- Clear communication from employers
- Support from leadership
- Employers valuing peers and their mental health
- Access to training on tele-health technologies
- Providing devices and adequate data plans for phones
- Flexibility and choice in delivery method for counseling

Factors that **Hindered** Peers

- Organizations or supervisors not providing a clear plan about transitioning to telehealth platforms
- Employers not providing telehealth delivery trainings
- Experiencing more mental health challenges
- Technical difficulties
- Limited flexibility in offering services



Recommendations for Organizations to Support CPS Moving Forward

It is expected that CPS practice will combine virtual service delivery with in-person service delivery. Below are recommendations for organizations to support their CPS workforce moving forward.

- **Provide CPS with assistance or training in using telehealth services**
- **Provide devices with adequate data plans to allow CPS to conduct their work without relying on personal devices**
- **Allow CPS flexibility in how they deliver services (video conferencing, phone, in-person)**
- **Ensure that CPS have access to resources in order to maintain their own mental health**