Embedding Peer Specialists into the Judicial System

Roles, Responsibilities, and Difficult Spaces

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What is a Peer Support Specialist?

- A **person in recovery** from a behavioral health condition (SUD, mental health, or co-occurring) that has the proper training and experience to work in a peer support provider role by providing mentoring, access to recovery resources, and knowledge of available support services for those who are experiencing behavioral health challenges.
- Peer Support Specialists have "been there done that" – they share a **similar experience** with the client
- They are **trained** in best practices, communication, ethics/boundaries, cultural competence, mental health, addiction recovery, and trauma-informed care.
- 100 hours education, 100 hours supervised experience, 2000 hours work experience, exam
- In Illinois, **certification** is managed by the Illinois Certification Board (www.iaodapca.org)

(All Rise, Incorporating Peer Recovery Support into Treatment Courts: Practice Guidelines for Treatment Court Professionals, Nov 2023; Illinois Certification Board, July 2024)

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Why in the judicial system?

- Persons who provide recovery support WITH lived experience are critical to breaking the cycle of incarceration – they can build trust with the client very quickly
- Judicial Peer Specialists understand both sides – the client and the judicial system
- Judicial Peer Specialists incorporate trauma-based knowledge and care based on their own experience
- They are the NON-CLINICAL component to the team

(SAMHSA Advisory, April 2026; All Rise, Incorporating Peer Recovery Support into Treatment Courts: Practice Guidelines for Treatment Court Professionals, Nov 2023)

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The Impact of a Peer's Involvement

- Reduction in relapse
- Improved treatment engagement
- Improved retention in all programs
- Higher participant satisfaction
- Reduction in emergency services/hospitalizations

(All Rise, Incorporating Peer Recovery Support into Treatment Courts: Practice Guidelines for Treatment Court Professionals, Nov 2023)



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What are the **critical components** to the recovery process:

- **Physical** – detox, MAR
- **Psychological** – cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) by identifying triggers, modifying behaviors, learning new coping tools
- **Social** – relapse prevention planning (warning signs, cravings, social supports, groups, peer networks), family relationships
- **Environmental** – stable and safe housing, job, transportation, identification

(NIDA, 2026; SAMHSA, 2026)

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Core Roles of Peer Specialists in the Judicial System

- ***Recovery support and mentorship***
- ***Systems navigation***
- ***Engagement and trust building***
- ***Advocacy within appropriate boundaries***



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Recovery Support and Mentorship

- Share lived experience appropriately and ethically
- Help participants navigate early recovery
- Provide hope by modeling long-term recovery
- Relapse prevention planning

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Systems Navigation

- Help participants understand court expectations
- Translate legal language into understandable terms
- Connect individuals to treatment, housing, employment, and community resources

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Engagement and Trust Building

- Serve as a bridge between participant and court team
- Reduce fear
- Reduce resistance to instruction
- Increase program retention

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Advocacy within Boundaries

- Elevate participant voice in staffings
- Identify social determinants that impact participant compliance
- Promote trauma-informed approaches and decisions



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Responsibilities of the Judicial Peer Specialist

- Ethical practice
- Professional boundaries
- Collaboration (with judge, public defender, prosecutor, probation officer, treatment provider)

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Ethical Practice

- Maintain confidentiality according to court policy
- Follow state certification standards (ICB)
- Avoid dual relationships
- Maintain appropriate documentation

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Professional Boundaries

- Not acting as legal counsel
- Not replacing clinical treatment
- Not becoming a participants sole support system

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Collaboration



A Judicial Peer Specialist must be able to work alongside all team members:

- Judge
- Public Defender
- Prosecutor
- Probation Officer
- Treatment Provider

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The Judicial Peer Specialist **must** understand the need for interdisciplinary professionalism and have clarity of their role within their work environment.

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So what are the "difficult spaces" that are unique to a Judicial Peer Specialist?

Embedding Peer Specialists into the courtroom is not without challenges.

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Power Dynamics

- Courtrooms are hierarchical environments by nature
- Peers may feel silenced in staff meetings
- Tension between advocacy and authority
- Navigation between differing beliefs regarding relapse and accountability
- Lack of respect for what a Peer brings to the team

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Confidentiality Conflicts

- Balancing peer ethics with court reporting requirements can be difficult
- Clear, written policies are **ESSENTIAL** in this space

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Tokenism

- Sometimes the Judicial Peer Specialist is included symbolically rather than meaningfully
- **TRUE** integration of this position must include:
  - ✓ Clear, defined responsibilities
  - ✓ Equal voice in staffing
  - ✓ Ongoing training for court team members

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Emotional Weight

- Hear traumatic stories
- Witness sanctions and incarcerations
- Manage personal triggers related to their own lived experience

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Keys to successful integration of a Judicial Peer Specialist:

- Clear MOU
- Defined scope of practice (job description)
- Ongoing cross training between legal and recovery professionals
- Trauma-informed court culture
- Leadership buy-in from judges and administrators

SAMHSA recovery-oriented systems emphasize the peer role as ***essential rather than *supplemental****

(SAMHSA, "Core Competencies for Peer Workers in Behavioral Health Services", 2015)

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What is the impact of a Judicial Peer Specialist?

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- Increase engagement
- Reduce recidivism
- Improve recovery outcomes
- Humanize the judicial process

Courts become a place of life restoration rather than basic judicial case management

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