What is a Peer Support Specialist?

**Department of Veterans Affairs**

In VHA, PSs [peer support specialists] are VA employees who help Veterans with serious mental illnesses and substance use disorders to successfully engage in their treatment. Peer Specialists promote recovery by sharing their own recovery stories, providing encouragement, instilling a sense of hope, and teaching skills to Veterans. These services are provided by an appropriately qualified, VA-employed Peer Specialist.

**Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services (SAMHSA)**

A peer provider (e.g., certified peer specialist, recovery coach) is a person who uses his or her lived experience of recovery from a mental illness and/or addiction, plus skills learned in formal training to deliver services in behavioral health settings to promote mind-body recovery and resiliency.

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**MENTAL HEALTH STATISTICS**

**VETERAN FACTS**

- **16.8** the average number of veterans who die by suicide each day (of those, 11 are not in VA care)

- **18%** deaths by suicide of individuals over 65

- **50%** of veterans are 65 and older

**2012** Executive Order directs the hiring of **800 peer specialists** at VA health facilities

**2018** The PEER Act mandates a pilot program to employ peer support specialists at up to **30 demonstration sites** within patient aligned care teams

**2020** 41% increase in the number of peer support specialists working at VA facilities over the last 8 years

**SENIOR FACTS**

- **2+ MILLION** seniors live with depression

- The majority of older adults who die by suicide were seen by a primary care physician within the past week or month

- **50% HIGHER** Cost of health care for seniors experiencing depression compared to those who are not

**MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE SHORTAGE FACTS**

- **111 MILLION** Americans live in mental health professional shortage areas

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**PEER SUPPORT SPECIALIST FACTS**

- **48 STATES** and the Department of Veterans Affairs have unique certification requirements to work as a peer support specialist

- **40 STATES** provide Medicaid reimbursement for services delivered by a peer support specialist

Peer support services significantly increase individuals’ abilities to manage their symptoms and reduce their reliance on formal services while still achieving positive recovery outcomes.
Citations
1 GAO-19-41 Peer Support Programs
3 United States Department of Veterans Affairs
4 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
5 United States Department of Veterans Affairs
6 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
7 Unutzer, J., “Depressive symptoms and the cost of health services in HMO patients aged 65 years and older” JAMA 277;20
9 United States Department of Health and Human Services