

## **Core Competencies for Peer Workers Frequently Asked Questions**

### **1. What are competencies?**

Competencies are defined as the integration of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that contribute to the quality of a person's work performance. Knowledge is information and understanding learned through experience or training. Skill is the result of applying knowledge or ability to a set of circumstances and attitude is the manner in which a behavior is performed. Attitudes often align with the principles or values of a practice.

### **2. What is meant by core competencies?**

Core competencies are the foundational and essential competencies required by all positions that provide peer support in behavioral health services. These competencies are common across a range of roles and environments. Peer roles in some settings or program models may require advanced or specialized competencies in addition to these core competencies.

### **3. Who are these competencies for?**

These competencies are intended for peer workers who offer formal peer support services within a behavioral health program. A peer worker is a person in recovery from a behavioral health condition who works, for paid or as a volunteer, in an organized program. Peers are defined as a person in recovery from mental illness and/or substance use disorders or, in the case of family peer support, a family member of a person living with a behavioral health condition.

### **4. How are these competencies written and organized?**

The core competencies were written with action verbs so that each competency would be an observable action. The competencies are organized into twelve categories for ease of reference and to make them more accessible.

### **5. How will these competencies be used?**

Core competencies can be used to promote best practices in peer support. They can be used to guide peer training programs, provide standards for peer certification, and inform job descriptions and performance evaluations. Organizations can use the competencies to build career ladders for peer workers who wish to develop a career in peer support services. Supervisors will be able to use competencies to appraise peer workers' job performance and, most importantly, the competencies will provide peers with a clear sense of the expectations of their roles. Peers will have more information to evaluate their own work performance, set professional goals, and become a more competent peer worker.

Core competencies are not intended to impose requirements upon people just entering the peer workforce, but rather to provide guidance for the development of initial and on-going training designed to support peer workers' continued competency development.

### **6. What are the benefits of identifying core competencies?**

This set of core competencies has the potential to guide the delivery and promote best practices in peer support.

### **7. What is the difference between core competencies and practice guidelines?**

Practice guidelines are usually defined as a set of recommendations developed by practitioners to provide standards of service delivery. Medical, clinical and other human service professions often have practice guidelines in addition to core competencies or performance standards. Typically there is much overlap between practice guidelines and core competencies as both articulate standards of behavior and philosophy of the approach.

**8. Can these core competencies be customized to specific peer roles in specific work settings?**

Yes. The core competencies may be customized in practice to reflect the variety of peer roles and program settings.

**9. How were these core competencies identified?**

SAMHSA engaged the BRSS TACS project to identify and describe core competencies for peer workers in behavioral health services. BRSS TACS staff and a team of experts reviewed the literature, synthesized lists of potential competencies and came to consensus about this list of core competencies.

**10. Does the peer support role only provide resources for support and assistance?**

The role of the peer goes beyond providing reassurance, which may not always be the appropriate response to crisis. The response to any crisis needs to be responsive to the situation and can include active listening/empathy and, if appropriate, reassurance, but also joint or independent problem solving, practical advice, concrete assistance of some kind, reaching out to family, friends, treatment team, or other key stakeholders, and linkage to specialty services the peer worker cannot provide. The peer workers' response to crisis is best understood as a continuum of potential responses and the key is having the ability to apply these different approaches and to know which approach to adopt when and to know to ask for help from a supervisor when the best response to the crisis is not clear.

**11. What does it mean to "create safe spaces"?**

The terms refers to one of the values described in the SAMHSA definition of recovery, "Recovery is supported by addressing trauma" in which services and supports should be trauma informed to foster safety and trust.

**12. Are there other crisis supports that may be available for persons in addictions recovery?**

Yes, these supports may be referred to as recovery management or relapse prevention.

**13. What is meant by "recovery-oriented language"?**

The SAMHSA definition of recovery includes a set of principles that help advance recovery opportunities for many people. These principles can be guides to using recovery-oriented language.

**14. Are there other collaborators a peer worker should consider when performing their duties?**

Yes, some of the other service systems to consider for collaboration with the peer's consent include hospitals, housing and homeless services, employment assistance, child welfare agencies, and the criminal justice system.

**15. What is meant by a support network?**

A support network refers to the relationships one may have with family, friends and others that provide encouragement and support to help individuals achieve their recovery goals.