

# Peer Support:

## Consumers Helping Consumers

SUMMER 2006

For many years, people with mental illness have been helping each other in their personal recovery journeys. Consumers share common experiences, which give them a unique opportunity to learn from, teach, and support each other. This is called **peer support**. People provide peer support all the time in formal and casual settings. Some examples where people find peer support include:

**Mutual support groups:** people meet by their own choice to help each other solve problems and talk about their concerns.

**Consumer-run services:** drop-in centers, residential, outreach and vocational programs that are staffed by consumers.

**Peer specialists:** consumers who are hired as staff in traditional clinic and rehab programs as well as in consumer-run services.

Many people also benefit from peer support

from their friends in everyday settings, on the internet, and from peers they meet at professionally staffed drop-in centers.

People also find peer support in programs like psychiatric and social rehabilitation and Clubhouses. All these settings are important and valuable. Consumers need referrals to attend some of these programs. These options give consumers **choices** to find peer support in settings where they are comfortable.

This report includes articles on Pennsylvania's plan for training and certifying **peer specialists**. This will allow programs where peer specialists work to receive Medicaid payment for their services. The report also tells personal stories about peer support like Enid's (below), and talks about places in Allegheny County where consumers are providing peer support. Research supporting the benefits of peer support is also included.

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## Peer Support Helped in my Recovery



"Eventually you get to the part where you can say, Look! I'm back! I've recovered! And you can pat yourself on the back and congratulate other people that you see making a success."

- Enid Knox

Drop-in centers are places where consumers can go to meet people, join in activities, and share peer support. Enid Knox has been visiting the New Horizons drop-in center in Bellevue for years. The support she found at the drop-in center has been important in her recovery.

When she first started going to New Horizons, she wasn't working and went to the drop-in as a way to manage her time. "After I got sick, I quit my job, I had no income, I was living with no utilities. I kept coming by the center. Penny [Director of Advocacy] told me she couldn't stand to see me in this shape. The Center helped me get to a personal care home, I started taking my medication, I got a case manager, and eventually moved to supportive housing. I'm a big positive right now!"

Now, she usually stops in every day—she lives nearby. She enjoys coming for the outings, the activities, and the support from her peers. "People are here to listen to you, not to put you down. People call and check in on you if you've been missed for a while."

*"The direct participation of consumers and families in developing a range of community-based, recovery-oriented treatment and support services is a priority... Consumer-operated services for which an evidence base is emerging should be promoted."*

*The President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health*

## Research Shows Value of Peer Support Services

### Benefits of Peer Support

Peer support opportunities help consumers to:

- Build social support networks
- Share information on all aspects of life, not just treatment
- Find and become role models
- Increase self-esteem and coping skills
- Help others

While still a rather new research area, peer support research has shown positive outcomes for participants. In a review of research studies, Solomon (1999) found that membership in self-help groups is associated with improved self-esteem, decision-making skills, and social functioning.

Studies have also shown that self-help members report improved psychiatric symptoms, increased coping skills, and increased life satisfaction, in addition to fewer admissions to psychiatric hospitals. Participation in peer support services has also been shown to reduce hospitalization lengths of stay. In a 1989 study of hospital records, members of a peer support group spent an average of 179 days hospitalized in the 32-month period prior to joining the organization, and 49 days in the 32-month period following participation (Kennedy 1989 as cited in Davidson et al. 1999).



Other studies have looked at how consumers compare to non-consumers as service providers. These studies have found that consumers treated by teams with peer specialists (consumers as staff) had equal or slightly better treatment outcomes than consumers treated on teams without peer specialists (Solomon 2004).

Other research has found that individuals rate peer-run services more favorably than traditional mental health services. In one study of drop-in centers, consumers preferred these consumer-run services because they offered more freedom, more support and caring, and less structure (Mowbray 1993). Researchers have also suggested that the development and use of peer support programs may lead to improvement in the mental health system's ability to offer recovery-oriented services.

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*Please contact AHCI for more information on the research referred to in this article.*

## Pennsylvania's Peer Specialist Proposal for Medicaid

In September of 2005, Pennsylvania's Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (OMHSAS) started a workgroup of consumers, family members, advocates, and providers, as well as county, managed care and state staff. This workgroup met for three months to create a plan for state-wide peer support services that could be paid for with Medicaid funds.

The plan was completed in December and is an important part of OMHSAS' plan to make the mental health system recovery-oriented.

The federal government is now reviewing this plan. OMHSAS hopes that the plan will be approved in the next few months and that the program will start in the fall of 2006.

People find peer support in many different settings (see page 1). The OMHSAS plan will create a training and certification program for **peer specialists** who will provide **peer support services** in peer-run organizations or traditional mental health agencies.

In this plan, a peer specialist is a person who identifies him or herself as a mental health consumer and uses or

has used mental health and/or co-occurring services. Peer specialists will need to complete a training and certification program created by OMHSAS.

Including peer support services in Medicaid should result in more peer support services becoming available. Certifying peer specialists will help to make high-quality and consistent services. Peer specialists will continue to do what peer support staff have been doing in many programs, including:

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- Helping consumers learn skills they need to direct their own recovery
- Helping consumers understand their options for services and supports
- Assisting consumers in finding resources and opportunities in the community of their choice
- Providing hope and encouragement

- Modeling the recovery process and coping skills

Examples of peer specialist job duties include listening and problem-solving, assisting with life and community skills, helping with appointments, starting self-help groups and Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) groups, and crisis management.

See page 8 for the qualifications OMHSAS has set for this program.

*“Having us [peers] get into the field is very, very exciting. Coming from a social services background, it’s very exciting and very challenging, because you are basically a pioneer. You’re changing people’s attitudes. You’re changing people’s perceptions. You’re changing everything.”*

—Joseph, Warmline Staff

## PSAN: Peer-Run Services in Allegheny County

Since 2001, the Peer Support and Advocacy Network (PSAN) has played an important role in making peer support services available to consumers in Allegheny County. Currently, PSAN provides peer support through peer advocacy, drop-in center activities and Warmline services.

**PSAN’s Mission:**  
*“To build a community, free of stigma, where individuals with mental illness work together toward recovery of mind, body and spirit.”*

PSAN is operated by mental health consumers. PSAN staff believe their experiences as consumers

help them understand the types of support consumers need in their journeys toward recovery.

In fact, PSAN administrators work hard to identify and address the needs of consumers that are not being met through traditional behavioral health services.

PSAN operates the Allegheny County Warmline, New Horizons Peer Support Center and the Center for New Hope and New Life. PSAN staff also includes Peer Advocates (see next page).

Through its recreation program, PSAN coordinates activities for consumers to meet and socialize. These activities have included trips to museums, picnics, and baseball games. For many consumers, the chance to talk and have fun with peers is an important part of recovery.



### PSAN’s Warmline Services

In 2005, PSAN began operating the Allegheny County Warmline. The Warmline is a peer support telephone service.

can leave a message and request that Warmline staff return the call during operating hours. The Warmline will consider expanding their hours in 2007.

Warmline staff are trained in supportive listening and can also offer problem-solving assistance and information and referrals about other forms of support. The Warmline is not a crisis service. However, operators can quickly transfer calls to other emergency telephone services, when they receive these types of calls.

**Allegheny County Warmline:  
 1-866-661-WARM (9276)  
 7 days a week, 2 p.m. to 10 p.m.**

The Warmline operates 2 p.m. to 10 p.m. seven days per week. Callers who dial the Warmline during other times

According to Joseph, one of the operators, “A lot of the services here in Allegheny County are 9-5 Monday-Friday. There’s nothing after five. A lot of our callers go to partial programs, psych rehab programs, etc. Then they come home, they’re feeling alone, they’re feeling isolated. They’re beginning to have issues with their illness. I feel having another option helps... [The Warmline] gives them peer-to-peer support. Somebody that’s been there, done that, experienced that.”

# Drop-in Centers: Where Consumers Connect

Several agencies in Allegheny County have drop-in centers for people with mental illness. Drop-in centers give consumers a chance to meet other consumers, learn skills, give and receive peer support (casually and in groups), and HAVE FUN!

In many cases, consumers are involved in running the drop-in centers through paid or volunteer positions. In some cases (like PSAN), the drop-in centers are entirely consumer-run.

Family Services of Western Pennsylvania employs peer staff at the **Olive Branch Drop-in Center** in New Kensington. Peer staff are responsible

for running the drop-in center. Members come to peer staff just to talk or for help with specific problems.

Staff are not the only people providing peer support at the Olive Branch Drop-in Center. In fact, it is often the case that members take the lead in providing peer support to other members.

David, a peer staff at the Olive Branch, describes the environment: “You see people at different stages of recovery here. You see people just off the streets who don’t know what recovery is about.

You see people who have been involved, but are ready to make another step forward [in recovery].”

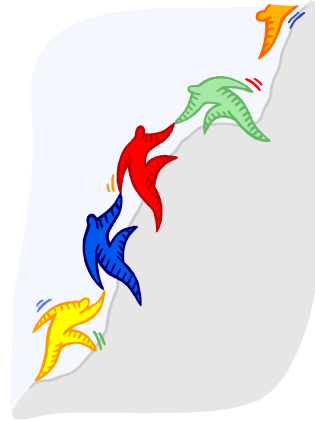
Another popular Allegheny County destination for peer support is found in South Oakland. This center is operated by **Peoples Oakland**, an agency which offers social, vocational, and wellness/recovery programs.

Peoples Oakland has lots of room for consumers to talk, play pool, eat, and participate in groups and other activities. Pool tournaments and the Steelers are taken seriously here! They also have a resource center with computers, a fitness area, a large kitchen, and a deck.

While Peoples Oakland does not employ members as peer staff, members play a very strong leadership role within the agency and in the community. Consumers lead educational classes and groups. The agency’s Board of Directors includes members. Members also participate in various commit-

tees within the agency and have a House Meeting every month.

Many of PSAN’s most important and most popular peer support activities occur at the organization’s two consumer-run drop-in centers—New Horizons Peer Support Center and The Center for New Hope and Life (see page 3 for more on PSAN).



The **New Horizons Peer Support Center**, located in Bellevue, offers its 300+ members an

opportunity to form connections with their peers. These connections often become an essential part of an individual’s journey toward recovery.

New Horizons is a friendly, casual place. All are greeted at the door by the receptionist and welcomed by staff and members alike. Consumers have a chance to talk over breakfast or lunch prepared at the peer-staffed and managed kitchen. Members can connect during a game of pool, or work in the computer lab. The center also offers educational activities like workshops, guest speakers and support groups.

**PSAN Peer Advocates** provide peer support at the center. Advocates help consumers find housing, attend medical appointments, sort out insurance issues, and connect with behavioral health services. Most often, consumers just need to talk with someone who understands their problems. Because the advocates are their peers, consumers find PSAN’s Peer Advocates easy to talk

## What is Recovery?

*Recovery is a process of growth.*

*It involves changing one’s attitudes and beliefs, developing new skills, taking on new roles, and developing and sustaining hope.*

*It is a way of living a satisfying, hopeful and productive life beyond the limitations that may be caused by disease or disability.*

*The journey of recovery is different for each person.*

*- Allegheny County Coalition for Recovery*

### Allegheny County Peer Support Resources

Allegheny County Office of Behavioral Health:  
412-350-4456

Center for New Hope and Life: 412-257-6859

Mental Health Association of Allegheny County:  
877-391-3820

Mercy Peer Training Program: 412-488-4914

New Horizons Drop-in Center: 412-766-8060

Olive Branch Drop-in Center: 724-224-1600

Peer Support and Advocacy Network (PSAN), and  
Allegheny County Coalition for Recovery: 412-227-0402

Pennsylvania Mental Health Consumer’s Association:  
800-887-6422

People’s Oakland: 412-683-7140

Turtle Creek Valley MH/MR: 412-351-0222

This is a sampling of resources available in Allegheny County. Call PSAN’s Warmline at 866-661-WARM and they can help you find other resources!

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to and easy to relate to.

Similar to New Horizons, the **Center for New Hope and Life (CNHL)** offers consumers a friendly place to find peer support. The Center is located on the grounds of Mayview State Hospital. As Janet, one of the staff says, “The center helps take care of that lonely feeling.”

*“The center helps take care of that lonely feeling.”*  
*Janet, Center for New Hope and Life Staff*

CNHL staff organize different activities to give consumers a chance to have fun and work on their social skills.

Participation in group activities is voluntary—consumers can take part or they can spend time reading, using the center’s computer or simply talking to other members. The drop-in center also encourages members to take care of their physical health by offering a walking program. Through the program, staff and members encourage each other to walk a path on the hospital grounds.

The people interviewed for this report talked of many different reasons and benefits for visiting and/or working at drop-in centers. Two themes shone through: consumers appreciate the choices (without pressure to participate) offered by the drop-in centers and the acceptance of people in different stages of recovery.

### Consumers speak on Drop-in Centers, Peer Support, and Recovery

“I can talk about my problems, and get support. [The staff] are never having a bad day, they’re always upbeat—they help me have more power, and show me how to handle things better.”

- Tracy  
Center for New Hope and Life (CNHL) member

“I come every day and eat lunch. It’s good for me to get out of the house. Part of recovery for me means meeting people, having a place to go.”

- Violet, New Horizons member

“I heard about the Center from other patients. I come everyday now. I like the crafts and talking to patients and staff. It makes a difference for me.”



- Brenda,  
CNHL member

“I come here for the relaxation, talking, playing games, and to stay off the streets. It’s a nice place and there should be more like this. It feels good to be here and out of the drug world.”

- Dwayne, New Horizons member

“I come here every Friday. I like the activities—I color, play pool, go to AA once in a while. I get support here—from the people who work here and come here.”

- Gary, New Horizons member



“The staff makes you feel like you’re welcome. They help you write letters. I like to play my guitar here.”

- Gary, CNHL member

“I come here to play pool, play cards, and get a free meal. Plus I get my exercise—I walk three miles each way to get here.”

- Mark, New Horizons member

“I come for the coffee!”

- Two members of the CNHL

# Peer Specialists Working in Allegheny County

## Spotlight: Peer Specialists and Community Treatment Teams

Allegheny County currently has four Community Treatment Teams (CTTs). CTTs provide community-based, intensive mental health and addiction treatment to people with serious and persistent mental illness.

Each CTT must include a team leader, **peer specialists**, a psychiatrist, nurses, mental health professionals, drug and alcohol specialists, and vocational specialists.

The teams are known for doing “whatever it takes.” They go beyond

helping clients to manage the symptoms of their illnesses to sup-

porting clients in defining their hopes and goals, and pursuing their personal recovery.

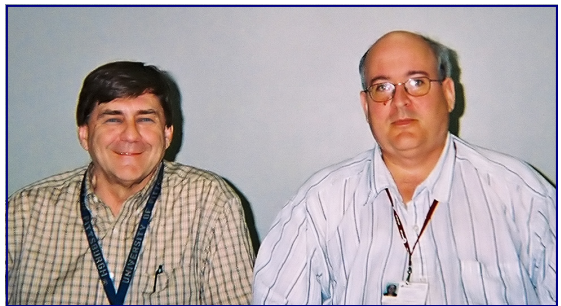
The peer specialists on the CTTs are full members of the team. Pete Tarnosky and Bill Napora are peer spe-

cialists on the Mercy CTT.

**“Now when I go out to Mayview - they give me KEYS!”**

Both Bill and Pete started as consumers in the Mercy system and completed the Mercy ICM Aide Program (see below). Pete had been homeless and “down and out” as a result of his illness. Bill had been in and out of hospitals (including Mayview State Hospital) for years. Both have worked on CTT for several years. Working with CTT has been important for both in their own recovery. As Bill says, “this job IS my mental health.”

understand consumers’ experience because they haven’t lived it. It can be very challenging for peer specialists to define boundaries and manage the stress. Bill is back at work part-time for now; all his coworkers have been really supportive.



*Pete Tarnosky and Bill Napora, Mercy CTT Peer Specialists*

### What does it take?

According to Bill and Pete, being able to listen, form relationships, and empathize are the most important skills for peer specialists. They have organized outings, bingo groups, shopping trips, and movies. Bill and Pete see their primary role as “social” although they do just about everything other staff do. Their coworkers often forget they are consumers.

**“Am I a consumer? Am I a professional? Am I both? Am I neither?”**

Bill was recently hospitalized after 14 years. This very difficult experience made him realize all over again what it’s like to be on that side – the medications, the doctor telling him he couldn’t sign himself out, etc. Both believe professionals can’t truly

*“The most important skill for a peer specialist is to listen. Not talk, but listen. And to build a relationship and have empathy.”*  
- Pete Tarnosky and Bill Napora

## Agencies Offer a Variety of Peer Staff Opportunities

*Here are some examples of agencies in Allegheny County with Peer Staff opportunities.*

### Mercy Behavioral Health

Mercy Behavioral Health (MBH) offers a training for individuals interested in becoming consumer providers or in pursuing a career in human services.

The training is offered twice a year. To participate, a person must be a member at one of MBH’s rehabilitation programs (or be willing to become a member), have a high school diploma or GED, have taken one or more rehab courses on recovery, and be at an advanced stage in his/her recovery. The program includes

classroom training, field visits, and an internship.

According to Harold Hartger of MBH, over 100 people have been employed through this program and most are still working successfully. The jobs have provided many benefits beyond the pay check, such as status, self es-

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teem, social supports, opportunities for advancement, and the chance to give back to others. Currently, MBH has about 28 people who are working as peer staff. They are working as case management aides, behavioral health aides, and social rehab aides, both full-time and part-time.

**Turtle Creek Valley MH/MR**

Since 1999, the Peer Staff Program at Turtle Creek Valley MH/MR has

employed consumers. Over time, peer staff have taken on more responsibilities and leadership roles. According to Darlene Karpaski of TCV, “Consumers have really risen to the challenge.” Currently, peer staff work in several TCV departments, including Psychiatric and Social Rehabilitation and Employment Services.

Peer staff not only provide peer support, they also run training programs for non-peer TCV staff.

**Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic**

WPIC started the Mobile Medications Team in November of 2005. The team includes three nurses, a peer counselor, and a psychiatrist. The peer counselor helps engage consumers in treatment. The peer counselor also serves as a mentor and role model, helps consumers connect to other services and supports, and helps with medication monitoring.

**Peer Staff Perspectives**



I was a member of New Horizons for 3 months before becoming an employee. When I got hired, nothing really changed—I’m doing the same things I was before.

I’ve been on Social Security the last five years and will be getting booted off because I’m working, which is better for me. I’d rather be working.

I’m passionate about breaking down the stigma and discrimination and helping other patients that are less fortunate than me. The Center has provided me with an outlet—there’s the people here and the resources to do that.

James Kindler,  
PSAN Peer Advocate

Working at the drop-in center means a lot to me. It means I get to be a role model, which is important to me.

Terrence Kelly, Peer Staff at the Olive Branch

Here, we are not therapists, we don’t diagnose people. We don’t put labels on folks. They are peers. Once people find out they are your peer, they are more willing to open up.

I think a lot of providers are starting to turn around and recognize the importance of peer support and they are looking at us as another option.

Joseph, Warmline

The mental health system in Pittsburgh literally saved my life, and I have really wanted to give back after all these years.

Peer support services have come a long way in this County. In ten years, we have progressed mightily! Ten years ago, you didn’t have a choice as to what your treatment plan would be or what kind of medications you would be on. You had to do what they told you, or else. And now you have a choice.

Elizabeth, Warmline

It’s been great to have a job again. In the beginning, I was a little apprehensive. My background is not in psychology. I felt that I was inadequate. I talked to my supervisor and he thought I was doing a good job. Training helped me understand the difference between being a doctor or a therapist and being an operator [for PSAN’s Warmline].

I think peer support services are very important. I think people are more comfortable talking to other consumers. They feel like they can let their hair down and talk to us about things they wouldn’t feel comfortable talking about with a doctor or a therapist.

Ruby, Warmline

Bottom line is we’re helping one another. I’ve seen members helping other members. I’ve seen members actually go out with other members to fix something, like Social Security or Medicare issues.

David Doctor,  
Peer Staff at the Olive Branch

# Peer Support in PA: A Bright Future

Interest and support for peer services is growing across the country and right here in Pennsylvania. The individual stories of consumers and peer staff, as well as research, continue to provide evidence supporting the expansion of peer services. For many people, peer support plays a very important role in their recovery.

People have different options for finding peer support—from drop-in centers, to their friends, to peer specialists working in traditional mental health services. Pennsylvania’s proposal for a training and certification program for peer specialists is a promising development. Other opportunities for less formal peer support will stay important for many people. This peer support initiative should result in more peer support services becoming available.

*“It’s an exciting, exciting thing. I think that it’s one of the greatest moves that’s ever been made. It’s about darn time! It’s a wonderful opportunity. I will have the chance to get some valuable recognition that I’ve been looking for, for a long time.”*

—Elizabeth, Warmline Staff, on the state’s Peer Specialist proposal

## OMHSAS Peer Specialist Qualifications

OMHSAS has developed a list of qualifications for the peer specialist program. Consumers will need to:

- Identify themselves as a current or former user of mental health or co-occurring services, have experience consistent with consumers of the service, and be able to relate to others with similar disorders
- Have a high school diploma or GED
- Show strong verbal and writing skills
- Understand recovery concepts and how to support others in recovery
- Demonstrate their own successful efforts at self-directed recovery
- Believe in the idea of consumer choice and empowerment
- Be able to build positive relationships with peers

- Have 12 months of full or part time paid or volunteer work within the last three years. Post-high school education will be considered too.

Peer specialists will also need to attend training and pass a certification test (approved by OMHSAS).

Just like other professionals, peer specialists will have regular supervision. Peer specialists will be responsible for completing paperwork on the services they provide. Peer support services can be provided in the community or in a clinic setting as long as it has been approved for Medicaid funding. Peer specialists can work as part of an existing agency or in an independent peer support service.

*“What I see as one of the most important parts of recovery — is being able to give back to other people. Because if you just keep everything that’s been given to you, you’re not going to be able to grow.”*

- David Doctor, Peer Staff at the Olive Branch

**More information will be available from OMHSAS once the program is approved. Please check the AHCI web site ([www.ahci.org](http://www.ahci.org)) for updates.**

**This report is a publication of Allegheny HealthChoices, Inc. AHCI would like to thank all the people who helped us write this report.**

Do you have a program or personal story that involves peer support? Contact us so we can hear your story and include it in an upcoming report.

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*AHCI is a private, not-for-profit contract agency for Allegheny County’s Department of Human Services. Our mission is to assure equitable access to quality, cost-effective behavioral health care that promotes positive clinical outcomes, recovery, and resiliency.*