

February 25, 2023

House Committee on Health Care
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 03

Re: *Governor's Proposed FY2024 Budget – Peer Support Credentialing*

Dear House Committee on Health Care:

This letter follows the testimony of Patricia Singer, M.D. and Wilda L. White, before the House Committee on Health Care on February 22, 2023.

Wilda L. White is a consultant to the Department of Mental Health on peer support credentialing and submits this letter, with its permission, on its behalf.

Appropriation Request

The Department of Mental Health requests an appropriation of \$187,500 from the General Fund to fund the start-up and implementation of a Medicaid-complaint, statewide, mental health peer support provider certification program.

Allocation of Requested Appropriation

The Department of Mental Health expects the funds to be matched as Medicaid Administrative Claiming (50% Federal funds), which would yield up to \$375,000 to operate a certification program, and train and certify an initial cohort of 60, mental health peer support providers in the program's first year.

There are essentially three steps in any peer support provider certification program: (1) Screening; (2) Training; and (3) Credentialing.

Screening involves determining whether an applicant meets the minimum standards for applying for certification. Training, which is required for a program to become eligible for Medicaid reimbursement, involves ensuring that prospective peer support providers have a basic set of competencies necessary to support Medicaid-eligible individuals. Credentialing involves determining whether the applicant has met the requirements for certification.

The Department of Mental Health expects to issue Requests for Proposal for peer-run entities to oversee screening and training, and for a peer-run entity to split certification duties with the Office of Professional Responsibility. Screening and training will be the responsibility of a single entity.

The duties involved in screening, training, and certification are illustrated below.

Screening	Training	Certification
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Determine whether applicants meet age, lived experience, work history, etc., requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Teach applicants the required, core competencies ▪ Develop curriculum for specialized certifications (e.g., peer support provider supervisor certification) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Administer exam ▪ Ensure attestation to Code of Ethics ▪ Ensure continuing education requirements are met ▪ Investigate and enforce, when required ▪ Re-certify ▪ Maintain public facing web site of certified peer support providers

The funds will be allocated roughly as follows:

	Screening and Training	Certification	Administrative Costs and Contingencies	TOTAL
General Fund	\$112,500.00	\$50,000.00	\$25,000.00	\$187,500.00
Federal Funds	\$112,500.00	\$50,000.00	\$25,000.00	\$187,500.00
TOTAL	\$225,000.00	\$100,000.00	\$50,000.00	\$375,000.00

Timeline

The Department of Mental Health expects the first cohort of peer support providers to enter training by January 2024.

The Department expects to spend most of 2023 finalizing the program structure, issuing the requests for proposals and selecting successful proposals, and amending the Medicaid State Plan to include peer support services as a covered, Medicaid service.

Why Certification

A mental health peer support provider certification program offers the following benefits to Vermonters:

- Allows billable services to Medicaid
- Creates employment opportunities for individuals with mental health and/or substance use challenges, who as a group have the highest rates of unemployment in the United States due to discrimination
- Allows for development of a peer support provider workforce
- Ensures employed peer support providers meet certain standards of experience and training
- Ensures competency standards for peer support providers
- Ensures ethical standards
- Allows peer support providers to achieve and maintain a professional credential
- Creates a career ladder and professional development opportunities for peer support providers

About Peer Support

Peer support is an evidence-based, non-clinical approach to aiding individuals with mental health and/or substance use challenges. Peer support emphasizes a non-judgmental, values-driven approach that promotes multiple perspectives, and advocates for human rights and dignity. Peer support is based on a genuine, mutual relationship between the peer support provider and another individual. Peer support providers use their lived experience of trauma, mental health and/or substance use challenges in combination with specialized training to assist an individual in achieving the goals and objectives in the individual's person-centered, wellness plan.

The evidence-based benefits of peer support include: (1) reduced hospitalization rates; (2) reduced inpatient days; (3) lowered overall cost of services; (4) increased use of outpatient services; (5) increased quality of life outcomes; (6) increased engaged rates; and (7) increased whole health.

Where Peer Support Providers Work

Peer support providers offer peer support services in a variety of settings, including but not limited to (1) peer run respites; (2) schools; (3) prisons and jails; (4) hospital emergency departments; (5) outpatient day programs; (6) inpatient psychiatric hospitals; (7) community centers; (8) mobile crisis response teams; (9) street outreach; (10) individual homes; (11) support teams in housing agencies; (12) community mental health agencies; and (13) peer run agencies.

Medicaid Requirements

A Medicaid-compliant, mental health peer support certification program must provide for training, certification, and mandatory continuing education that ensure that peer support providers have a basic set of competencies necessary to support individuals with mental health challenges.

Relationship to Mobile Crisis Response

The Department of Mental Health is also requesting an appropriation for a new Mobile Crisis Response Program, as described by Commissioner Emily Hawes in her February 23, 2023, testimony before the House Committee on Health Care.

The Department expects peer support providers to be one of the two that staff the two-person, mobile crisis response teams. While certification may not be in place by September 2023, the Department expects to move forward with peer support providers and will provide training to support them in the work. After the certification program is in place, the Department expects to utilize certified peer support providers as one of the two who respond to crises in the community.

Peer support provider certification is important to ensure consistency in training, standards and skills.

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Please feel free to reach out if you have any questions or concerns.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Wilda L. White". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Wilda L. White

cc: Patricia Singer, M.D., Department of Mental Health