

# Vermont Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health



Testimony: S.195 Certification of Mental Health Peer Specialists

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Thank you Chair Lippert and Members of the House Healthcare Committee:

As the Executive Director of the Vermont Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, I'd like to share that we have long supported peer certification.

As one of the first state chapters established 32 years ago under the umbrella of the National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health ([ffcmh.org](http://ffcmh.org)), we have been providing statewide peer support for families impacted by children's mental health concerns since our incorporation in 1990 by families with lived experience helping other families in need. A SAMHSA Statewide Family Network grant focused solely on children's mental health makes funded peer support possible.

The General Assembly findings in S.195 state that "*certification can encourage an increase in the number, diversity, and availability of peer support specialists.*" Our experience has been that certification alone does not encourage this. To also find that no certification protocols are available nor exist is not the case in children's mental health.

In 2012, the National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health finalized an in-depth, multi-year, extremely rigorous and costly process to create the only national certification process for parent support providers. In 2020, they launched an updated national certification, renamed the peer role certified to Family Peer Specialists to more adequately reflect that support is not merely to parents and updated workforce core competencies.

On the NFFCMH website is a link to its certification process. The application, eligibility criteria, training, code of ethics, and core competencies are detailed in its 32-page Candidate's Handbook. <https://www.ffcmh.org/certification> In order to apply for certification through the NFFCMH, an applicant must detail lived experience, document a minimum of 1000 hours of employment or volunteer experience in the field of family support, have a minimum of 88 hours of training and 20 hours of supervision/mentoring. Certification + incentive can increase capacity within the peer workforce.

Over the past decade only 3 VFFCMH employees have chosen the certification path. Certification is granted for a 2-year period; none reapplied when their certifications expired. There was no incentive to do so. To be certified did not increase their employability. To be certified did not result in wage increase. That said, those providing peer support are constantly training and updating their skills.

Family organizations are always on alert for free and low-cost training opportunities not only for our staff but for the families that contact us for support. There was a time when we needed to offer trainings to families, but technology has changed that. Over the past 2 years in particular, it has not been uncommon to train together as we tap into a plethora of web-based trainings on every subject mentioned in S.195.

The evolution of S.195 currently feels like it is taking peer and family organizations further away from their grassroot origins and their national networks of expertise. A certifying entity that seeks merely "feedback and recommendations" from statewide family networks would, in our opinion, marginalize the expertise that exists in the peer services and related workforce. That said, S.195 has re-invigorated conversations long overdue as the peer workforce is not unlike the provider systems where inadequate funding and labor shortages have hampered access to services for those in need.

VFF recently lost its Family Support Coordinator to the provider system when a Designated Agency hired her for a school-based clinician role. As a micro-nonprofit, we could not offer what would have retained her services with us – F/T employment + insurance. We acknowledge that what exists now is far less than what is needed and that Medicaid reimbursement for services rendered would open doors. We are very cautious about opening doors that take us further away from the families we are missioned to serve and appreciate the opportunity to share our thoughts today.