

How to Recruit Members for Your Peer Support Team



If your organization is developing a peer support team, selecting who will serve on that team is critical. To develop a team that will be capable, flexible and sustainable, consider these guidelines.

Where to Start

Consider anonymously polling all members of your organization. Ask, “Who would you want to talk to after a stressful call or when facing a personal problem?” Asking this simple question can help generate an initial group of individuals who are known to be trustworthy in your organization. Keep an open mind about who will be nominated, as the names may surprise you. Since trust is the foundation of a lasting peer support team, all peer support team members must be willing and able to adhere to the team’s confidentiality policies.

Aim for a broad demographic makeup that reflects your whole organization. A peer team should be diverse and reflect a mix of genders, races, ethnicities and ages. Also consider other non-demographic factors, such as job type, rank, retiree status and military status. These are all important factors to consider when matching a trained peer to someone who needs help.

Assess the Potential Team Member

Beyond the organizational makeup of your peer team, it’s important to assess the capacity of each individual to serve. Every peer will bring different strengths, challenges and experiences to your team. In evaluating a peer to serve on your team, consider these questions:

1. **Is the person passionate about behavioral health and helping others?** This is first and foremost. If someone does not grasp the concepts of emotional and behavioral health, or if they do not want to help others, they will not serve the peer team well.
2. **Is the person generally liked and respected?** The individual should be able to relate positively to others on the job. On the most basic level, is the person accepted by their own peers and within the organization?
3. **Is the person willing and eager to serve?** Just because an individual is interested in behavioral health and well respected by their crew doesn’t mean they want to serve on a peer team. Serving as a peer is a big emotional and time commitment that is not for everyone. An individual should have an internal desire to serve on the team.
4. **Is the person able to serve at this time?** Ability to serve on a peer team comes down to a few important factors: time, organization and personal wellness.

- **Time:** Serving on a peer team can be time consuming. If a person is already stretched thin with work, overtime shifts, a second job or major family obligations, they should carefully consider if they have the time to serve on a peer team.
- **Organization:** Organizational skills and follow through are key to being a successful peer supporter. The person should be organized enough to handle confidential information, connect to specific community referrals and follow up with members when needed.
- **Personal Wellness:** Is the individual physically, emotionally and mentally healthy enough to dedicate time to help others?



Consider the Potential Team Member’s Behavioral Health

Being a peer supporter is not just about being interested or having the free time to do it. One’s capacity to serve on a peer team is fundamentally tied to their own behavioral health. Consider the following:

- **Does the person use coping skills when faced problems or stress?** An effective peer supporter will have some go-to hobbies, relaxation strategies or an outlet that helps them cope. They should be comfortable talking about how they personally manage stress.
- **Does the person use social support, both at the station and in their personal life?** A good peer supporter knows we cannot do it all alone. We all need other people to lean on.
- **Does the person strive for work/life balance?** While work/life balance in the fire service can look different than a nine-to-five job, the person should not be married to the job seven days a week, 24 hours a day. Does the person take time off when needed for self-care or pick up every overtime shift to the detriment of their own health, relationships or family’s needs?

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Being an effective peer supporter is as much about having good people skills as it is about being able to take care of yourself on the job and in life. Peer support can be emotionally rewarding, but is draining and time-consuming work. Without good personal boundaries and a plan for self-care, burnout is a real risk. For more in-depth behavioral health screening tools to use to assess peers, see the box below:

Behavioral Health Screening

For teams that want a more thorough approach to assess a potential team member's mental and emotional wellness, standardized behavioral health screening tools are a good place to start.

A behavioral health screening tool is a brief questionnaire (usually about 4-5 items) that is validated to detect a specific behavioral health issue that may need further assessment (such as post-traumatic stress disorder, alcohol disorder, depression, etc.). If a person screens positively on a specific screen, they would be encouraged to follow up with a more in-depth mental health assessment with a clinician. Left unaddressed, symptoms could progress into serious mental health conditions and interfere with one's ability to function at work, at home or on the peer team. If your peer team chooses to use behavioral health screening, here are some tips:

- Remember, screening is NOT a diagnostic assessment or mental health evaluation and does not result in a diagnosis.
- Individual screening results should be kept strictly confidential by the peer team clinician and are not to be shared with the peer team leader, management or union.
- Behavioral health screening should always be voluntary, but refusal to participate in screening could impact an individual's ability to serve on the peer team.

Below is a non-exhaustive list of commonly used behavioral health screening tools in the mental health field. These tools are free, available in the public domain and are also appropriate for use in routine annual fire department physicals that include a behavioral health component:

- **Primary Care PTSD Screen** (Screens for current symptoms of PTSD)
- **PHQ2 or PHQ9** (Screens for current symptoms of major depressive disorder)
- **CAGE-AID** (Screens for current symptoms of drug or alcohol abuse)

Can Individuals in Recovery Serve on a Peer Team?

Absolutely. Individuals who have dealt with their own behavioral health challenges are naturally drawn to serve as peer supporter — and this is a good thing. Experience builds knowledge, empathy and credibility to serve others. If an individual in recovery from addiction or mental health challenges wants to serve on the team, your team mental health

clinician can assess and determine if he/she is in a stable place in recovery. The following issues could signal someone needs more time to focus on his/her own needs, prior to serving on the peer team.

- Coping with acute, untreated behavioral health problems
- Facing severe personal stress or recent loss
- Having obvious performance problems or difficulty functioning at work

If your peer team needs a mental health clinician, see the [IAFF Guide on Finding the Right Clinician](#).

Get to Know Your Peers

After you have considered the organizational makeup of your team members' personal qualities and well-being, it's time to get to know your peer supporters. Every peer supporter will have areas of personal strength and vulnerability. Getting to know your peer team means exploring what personal challenges and adversities each peer has experienced in his/her life time. Knowing what issues your peers are (and are not) equipped to deal with can help preserve your team in the long run.

A simple questionnaire can help you understand the life experiences of your peers. Consider asking peers if they or their family members have coped with the following issues:

- Line-of-duty death
- Suicide
- Cancer
- Substance use
- Divorce, separation or custody issues
- Retirement challenges
- Elder care
- Recovery from mental illness or addiction

For a sample questionnaire, contact behavioralhealth@iaff.org.

Check-In Regularly

Once your peer team is up and running, it's important to check back in with your peers regularly. Individual peer supporters need to know their efforts matter, they are cared for and they are valued by the team. Regular peer team meetings are great opportunities for the following:

- Ongoing training
- Checking morale
- Receiving support from other peer supporters (peer supervision)
- Receiving clinical supervision from the team clinician (clinical supervision)
- Celebrating success stories
- Sharing challenges and lessons learned
- Comparing notes on clinical and community referrals

For more assistance with building your peer team, see the IAFF Guide on [Ten Steps to Build Your Peer Support Program](#).

