

IPS Peer Specialists

The role of peers in IPS has expanded in recent years. Peer specialists refer to IPS unit members who have similar life experiences to people who receive IPS services. Peers have a unique ability to inspire hope in others by sharing how they overcame obstacles to achieve their own career goals.

The job duties of peer specialists vary by location. Some peers help other people consider employment. For example, at one mental health agency, a peer meets with every new client of the agency. She shares how she found work that she loves in spite of past legal problems, substance abuse problems, and years of unemployment. She also describes the IPS program so that when people feel ready to pursue work, they know what services are available. Other peers are members of IPS teams and augment the work of IPS specialists. They help engage people in IPS services, talk to people about their short and long-term career goals, help people remain hopeful about work, help people obtain identification to be hired, help people learn transportation routes to a job, help job seekers with job applications, and provide additional supports. There are probably many different job descriptions for peers in the U.S. and other countries. The peer support specialist role is to augment IPS services, and not replace the job duties of the IPS specialist.

Many mental health agencies also hire peer specialists to help with services other than IPS. This manual does not refer to those positions. The sample questions that are listed in the fidelity items for peers for the fidelity review refer to peer support specialists who are part of the IPS team, unless otherwise noted.

Some IPS programs hire people with lived experiences as employment specialists. People in these positions have identical responsibilities and salaries to other employment specialists on the team. The difference is that they may occasionally share personal experiences to help the students and workers on their caseloads. Their experiences are considered to be an additional qualification for the job. When we write about IPS peers, we are not referring to employment specialists who happen to have lived experiences.

If peers provide the full range of employment services to a caseload of people (peers operate as IPS specialists), reviewers use information from peers in the same way that they use information from IPS specialists when scoring items. For example, they would include the caseload sizes of peers when calculating the score for the fidelity item **Caseload Size**. In this situation, reviewers may also ask why people in peer positions are not simply hired as IPS specialists.

As a general rule, the inclusion of peers on the team usually will not affect the fidelity score either way because the IPS supported employment fidelity scale does not measure the role of peer support specialist. Future updates of this scale should include the role of peer support specialists based on the emerging evidence.

Highlighting the positive contributions of peer support staff should be written into the narrative of the fidelity report. For example, a peer support specialist who meets with new agency clients

as part of intake is helping to increase access to IPS, and it should be noted under the item **Zero Exclusion**. On the other hand, if a peer support specialist is functioning at cross purposes to IPS fidelity, it should be noted as well. For example, if a peer support specialist advises clients to start with volunteer jobs because in her experience working a competitive job is challenging, it should be noted in the report under the item **Ongoing, Work-based Vocational Assessment**. Although many program staff report that IPS peer specialists improve services, peer positions are not necessary for good fidelity to IPS supported employment. Remember that the full-fledged employment specialist who has lived experience is treated like any other IPS specialist in the fidelity review process.