

# A Workforce Built on Lived Experience: Scaling Peer Support Across California

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*A group of Peer Support Specialist from SHARE!, a peer-run nonprofit in Los Angeles.*

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For many young people and adults navigating mental health or substance use challenges, the hardest part isn't finding services, it's finding someone who truly understands what you are going through. Someone who can say, "I understand," and mean it.

That is the power of peer support. Because of it, many Californians are experiencing deeper connection and practical guidance that strengthens their recovery. Marshea Pratt, Vice President of Workforce and Community Engagement for National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) California, an organization offering peer support, puts it simply, "I've been where you are, and I've recovered, and I feel hopeful and I feel joy, and you can too."

That message is the driving force behind California’s growing Peer Support Specialist workforce, supported by the Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (CYBHI). Peer Support Specialists are individuals with lived experience of mental health or substance use challenges who are trained to support others by way of their own recovery. In the behavioral health world, “peer” means someone who has been through something similar—someone who brings understanding, credibility, and hope in a way traditional services often can’t. These programs train individuals to use their experiences to guide others in recovery, reducing stigma, expanding access, and building a workforce that reflects the communities it serves.

Marshea explains why this matters: “People with lived experience know ... [how] to get at the heart of what’s really going on with you in a way that is respectful, in a way that’s not intimidating, and in a way that has just a different type of compassion.”

Jessica Miller, Director of Training at Self-Help And Recovery Exchange (SHARE!), a peer-run nonprofit in Los Angeles, sees this transformation every day. “People come into the program feeling a lot of shame about their past,” she says. “But very quickly they realize: you can work, you can have a job, and you can still be somebody with lived experience. In fact, you can use that experience to help other people at the same time.”



*Jessica Miller, Director of Training at Self-Help And Recovery Exchange (SHARE!)*

The Peer Personnel Training and Placement Program is working to scale the role of a Peer Support Specialist, supported by the California Department of Health Care Access and Information (HCAI). With grant resources provided by this program, organizations like SHARE!, NAMI

California, Cal Voices' Wise University, and many others, provide classes that teach individuals how to act as Peer Support Specialists; what their role is, what they bring to the table, and how they differ from traditional providers. While program curricula may vary from organization to organization, all are geared towards preparing individuals to take the exam to become a certified California Mental Health Services Authority (CalMHSA) Medi-Cal Peer Support Specialist, a position that qualifies individuals to pursue a career in this emerging field.

Once training is complete, the program helps participants prepare for the job search—resumes, cover letters, and interviews—so they're better positioned to get hired as Peer Support Specialists. The result of this unique program is twofold: those who have struggled with mental health are given education, mentorship, and careers, and those who are seeking support are provided with a new type of provider that can relate to their experiences and help them navigate the path to recovery.

For Peer Support Specialist Caitlin Mendibles, that realization was life-changing. Despite being connected to a network of services, she struggled to break the cycle of relapse. "I was in a step-down mental health program, and I was on psychiatric medication, I was seeing a therapist and a psychiatrist, I had a whole Full Service Partnership (FSP) team working with me, [but]



*Caitlin Mendibles, Peer Support Specialist*

I was in this cycle of relapse, you know, mental health relapse, substance use relapse, and I just felt like I couldn't get out of it."

Everything shifted when she found SHARE!'s Peer Personnel Training and Placement Program. The program trains individuals to become Peer Support Specialists, using their experiences to help others navigate the road to recovery. Caitlin describes entering the program as being met with

a new sense of connection and possibility. “It was life changing,” she says. “SHARE!’s Peer Personnel Training has given me a new start... It gave me a reason to get up every day.”

After completing the training, Caitlin earned her certification and secured her first job as a Peer Support Specialist. Having a career where she could support others brought not only financial stability, but a renewed sense of responsibility and purpose. “Ever since I started working at SHARE! and supporting other people, I have not had a relapse with substance use or mental health. I’ve actually been able to stay off my mental health medication for a few years now.”

Not only does Caitlin benefit, but her clients benefit from someone who has been in their shoes and understands their journey. Her story provides hope and helps to reinforce that recovery is possible.

Jessica sees firsthand the positive impact that the Peer Personnel Training and Placement Program has on Peer Support Specialists. During the program training, she witnesses individuals become “empowered to take control of their lives.” Whereas in the past, their mental health or substance use challenges may have felt frustrating, limiting, or shameful, these challenges transform into an asset—something that gives them the unique ability to help other people address their own challenges.

Jessica has felt the positive impacts herself: “I’m a recovering heroin addict. ... I’ve been sober for almost six years now, and I have tried to get sober many times, but I’ve never been sober this long, and I think a big part of my sobriety is actually being able to work in this field and give back.”

The positive impacts that employment has had on Caitlin and Jessica’s recovery are not unique. Research consistently shows that employment improves the mental health and wellbeing of people with serious mental disorders, including improved self-esteem, symptom control, quality of life, social relationships and community integration, without harmful side effects ([Drake & Wallach, 2020](#)). Yet, despite the benefits, only about 10-15%

of people with severe mental health challenges are employed. Many factors contribute to this gap, but one of the biggest is access: people who want to work often struggle to find job support programs that are equipped to help them succeed ([Yang et al., 2024](#)).

Programs like the Peer Personnel Training and Placement Program help close the gap. When individuals with lived experience receive structured training, career preparation, and ongoing support, they are far more likely to succeed in competitive employment. In other words, these programs are not just supportive, they are evidence-based pathways to long-term recovery ([Drake & Wallach, 2020](#)).

Despite the power of employment, peer support is about far more than job placement—it’s about helping people navigate a behavioral health system that can feel overwhelming. As Marshea describes, “They just hand it to you, and you’re left up to your own devices to figure it out ... there aren’t really a lot of guides to help you through [the behavioral health system].”

This is where Peer Support Specialists like those trained by Wise University shine, says Katrina Copple, Program Coordinator at Cal Voices’ Wise University Peer Personnel Training and Placement Program. “We’re able to meet the client where they’re at and walk them through, ‘Here’s what housing looks like. Here’s how you get assistance coming out of the military’ ... [we’re] able to connect them through a myriad of other opportunities to help them along with their recovery.”



*Katrina Copple, Program Coordinator at Cal Voices’ Wise University Peer Personnel Training and Placement Program*

Peers step into the spaces where people often fall through the cracks, helping them access housing, employment resources, benefits assistance, reentry supports, and more. Their experience becomes a source of expertise

that traditional providers may not have. Peers don't just understand an individual's recovery—they understand the systems wrapped around that recovery.

The peer workforce also brings something else communities have identified as a need in behavioral health services: cultural resonance. According to a study by the National Institute of Health, racial and ethnic minorities have less access to mental health services than whites, and are less likely to receive needed care, and are more likely to receive poor quality care when treated ([McGuire & Miranda, 2014](#)). Furthermore, 86% of psychologists in the U.S. are white, which is significantly less diverse than the U.S. population as a whole, which is 62% white and 38% racial/ethnic minority ([Lin et al., 2018](#)).

These disparities echo findings from CYBHI's [Youth at the Center report](#), where young people stressed the need for providers who look like them and understand their identities. They described the emotional labor of having to explain their cultures, backgrounds, or trauma to providers who didn't relate to them, sometimes resulting in ineffective or even harmful care. Peer Support Specialists help fill this gap, bringing lived experience, cultural understanding, and community connection in ways the traditional workforce often cannot.

“When you can understand and meet someone where they're at with that cultural lens, it gives the individual the opportunity to feel validated in their experiences and also to know that they hold value within that culture and that there are additional ways to heal,” says Katrina.

This kind of representation helps dismantle internalized stigma as well. Many people hesitate to seek help because they fear judgment or because the system has failed them before. “[I want people to know that] recovery is possible,” says Katrina, “Each person must work on their own recovery, but someone out there has done it before. Because of this, we can show people the way to wellness, happiness, and recovery that builds the potential and success in their own [lives].”

Across California, organizations are helping to scale this model statewide, training, certifying, and supporting peers who bring compassion, cultural understanding, and real-world experience to people who need it most. But the true engine behind this transformation isn't the curriculum or certifications—it's the people.

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The Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (CYBHI) is a flagship component of Master Plan for Kids' Mental Health and historic investment by the State of California to expand access and behavioral health support for children, youth, and families.