



Iowa Peer Workforce  
Collaborative



# Peer Support Worker Supervision and Retention: Focus Group Results

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## Peer Support Specialists

Peer support workers fill a relatively new and unique role in the U.S. behavioral healthcare system. Depending on their practice setting, peer workers in Iowa have different job titles, such as peer support specialist, peer recovery coach, and family navigator.

In this report, we'll use "peer support worker," "peer worker," or "peer staff" interchangeably for an adult in recovery or a parent/caregiver who uses their lived experience with a mental health or substance use challenge to provide services to other peers.

In Iowa, peer workers may apply for the Iowa Board of Certification (IBC) after completing IBC-approved peer specialist training.

## Peer Worker Supervision

As peer support workers are integrated into behavioral healthcare and other systems, supervisors need to know how to best supervise peer workers— to support their development and ensure quality peer services.

Supervisors in behavioral healthcare systems in Iowa, however, may be unaware that peer work is a profession. Like other professional groups, peer support specialists have a distinct value base, code of ethics, scope of practice, certification standards, and research literature.

Because supervisors may lack this knowledge, leaders in the peer support worker movement—such as the National Federation of Families, the National Association of Peer

Supporters, and the National Coalition for Mental Health Recovery—strongly urge States to offer peer supervisor training.

## Study Purpose

While leading peer organizations have described what to include in peer supervisor training, only two studies have asked peer supervisors to describe their experience supervising peer workers (Delman & Klodnick, 2017; Fogelson et al., 2022).

Understanding supervisors' perspectives is crucial in developing training that meets their professional development needs. We, the Iowa Peer Workforce Collaborative (IPWC), are committed to re-envisioning our peer supervisor training. In this study, we ask peer supervisors to describe their experiences supervising peer staff and strategies to retain them. We will use the results of this study and other information to develop a new peer supervisor training.

## Questions

Five peer supervisors met with researchers to develop the focus group questions:

1. What do peer workers do? How do they spend most of their time?
2. What do supervisors believe peer workers need?
3. What do supervisors need to know?
4. What do supervisors find challenging?
5. What can supervisors do to retain peer workers?

## Methods

We held four one-hour focus groups between October and November 2023. We invited people who had supervised a peer specialist who had completed a peer support training certificate, had completed a peer supervisor training themselves, or both. Supervisors may

have also supervised peers who have not completed IPWC training. Twenty-six supervisors attended a focus group. This study received human subjects approval from the University of Iowa.

## Participant Characteristics

The participants were employed at organizations in 77% of Iowa's 2023 Mental Health Disability Services regions. All the participants held middle or upper-management positions. Participants included supervisors in peer-run and non-peer-run organizations. On average, participants' organizations employed four peer support workers. Participants supervised peer staff with different Iowa peer worker specializations (Peer Support Specialists, Family Peer Support Specialists, Peer Recovery Coaches).

Nearly 62% of participants had completed at least one IPWC training (a peer specialist certificate: 38.5%; the supervisor training: 42%). About 64% of participants identified as a peer.

## Data Analysis

We analyzed data using thematic analysis. First, we independently coded participant responses by comparing similar or alike conceptual topics within and across questions. Then, we copied words and phrases from the participants' own words into eight to ten columns in a spreadsheet that reflected a topic. This in-vivo approach prioritizes and honors the participant's own voice. Next, we met to review alike topics. We repeated this process until we agreed on themes and subthemes for each question. Finally, the study results were sent to participants for feedback and comment.

## Results

Below, we summarize themes and subthemes for each question.

## Question 1: What do peers do? How do they spend most of their time?

Peer support workers spend most of their time working directly with peers individually or in a group setting. Eight of 26 participants estimated the percentage of time peer staff spent in non-peer interactions; 5 of those 8 participants reported peer staff spent between 30-40% of their time in non-peer interactions.

Participants also described what peer workers do when they meet with peer clients. These interactions included two major themes: **building relationships** and **providing support** to help peers get what they need. We identified three subthemes or **core skills** peer staff used to support peers.

- **Problem-solve** with peers, including helping peers assess their needs and set goals
- Connect or **refer** peers to resources
- **Teach** peers how to advocate for themselves or their children

Teaching was a stronger theme for Family Peer Support Specialists (FPSS; family navigators), who often assist parents in preparing for Individualized Education Plans and other meetings.

Non-peer interactions included:

- Document interactions with peers
- Assist with the day-to-day operations or functions of the organizations

Supervisors also mentioned two additional peer worker activities, although they did not rise to the level of a theme or subtheme:

- Attend meetings to communicate about or coordinate services for peers
- Educate others outside the organization about peer services

## Question 2. What do peer workers need?

We identified three major themes for Question 2. Supervisors thought peer support workers need:

- Ongoing training and on-the-job coaching
- Responsive supervision
- Other people in their organization to understand the peer role, scope of practice, and their contribution

“For my recovery coaches, the training is key. They really have a thirst for knowledge.”

### Ongoing Training and Job Coaching

Peer workers enter the profession with diverse backgrounds, including levels of education and skill development. Accordingly, supervisors thought their organizations needed to provide the resources to support ongoing opportunities for professional development. Supervisors emphasized the importance of on-the-job coaching and more formal training, such as the specialist training offered by IPWC.

“What I have found consistently with the three [peer workers] that we’ve employed over time is they request a lot of extra training, dependent upon what their focus is . . .”

Underlying this theme was the subtheme of individualization or **flexibility in meeting peer workers’ learning needs**. Coaching and training must be individualized to support each peer worker’s professional development.

“Some [peer workers] have needed more training than others in completely different areas. So, for me, it’s been a great learning experience to figure out what each of our peer support [workers] have needed individually and then how I can provide them that support as a supervisor. . .”

For instance, peer staff may lack hard skills like writing, managing their workload, or using software programs such as Excel.

“I did find during orientation and onboarding that there was more need for administrative training. Learning how just Outlook and Excel and tracking works even though it’s not a huge part of [their] job responsibility, that’s been an ongoing training that has taken more time than I expected, but that’s okay.”

### **Responsive Supervision**

Responsive supervision included three critical supervisor behaviors. Peer supervisors need to:

- Be **available**
- Provide time to debrief difficult peer client challenges and give **feedback**
- Support their **emotional well-being**

### **Availability and Feedback**

Supervisors reported that working with peer clients is emotionally challenging or heavy work. Supervisors need to help peer workers process their emotional reactions to peer clients who are struggling, including peer workers’ feelings of being overwhelmed or inadequate to help them.

“ . . . as far as supervisors being available to debrief after, in our case, challenging calls or interactions with a peer client just to process and get support when it’s been just a very heavy, particularly heavy day.”

“ . . . that availability of someone to bounce things off of, whether it’s me, whether it’s another team member, each other. They do a lot of supporting each other with questions. What do you think I should do with this particular client?”

### **Emotional Well-Being**

Supervisors thought they needed to help peer workers attend to their perceived work-life

balance, set boundaries, and take care of themselves.

“ . . . our conversations a lot of times surround boundaries and what’s yours to take and what’s yours not to take and how do you walk alongside people without taking on too much because that can then create some burnout . . .”

“They’re a great bunch of people, they have big hearts, but sometimes life struggles get to them and they need support.”

“ . . . about boundaries and just self-care and burnout and how do you balance all of those things, I think it is helpful to hear how other people do that and how to individualize that, right?”

Peer staff, occasionally, do relapse, and supervisors expressed an interest in receiving training on how to respond when relapse occurs.

“Another piece that has been a struggle over the years at times that I’ve tried to navigate is when we have a peer [worker] who has a relapse of severe mental health symptoms and understanding my role as a supervisor and how to help them manage that without crossing the line to become where I’m a service provider instead of a supervisor, . . .”

“We also had one of our peer folks who experienced a reoccurrence . . . That also was traumatic for the entire team and not recognizing the warning signs and all of those things. So I think some direct training on how to deal with the peers’ own recovery and issues that could happen with that working in the field.”

### **Peer Worker Role, Scope of Practice, and Contribution**

The third and fourth themes applied to administrators and other staff, not just

supervisors: supervisors said everyone needs to (a) understand what peer workers do and (b) how what they do contributes to the well-being of peer clients. What peer workers “do” includes understanding their professional **scope of practice**, which clarifies what peers are trained to do and what they should not do.

For instance, one supervisor said . . .

“. . . they want to know that the work that they’re doing is connected to the larger team and organization. It’s really important for them to know that the relationships and connections that they’re building with people seeking services is helpful, but they also want to know that the organization . . . values them and sees them as part of the work that we’re doing as a whole.”

These two themes—role/scope of practice and contribution—were also prominent themes or subthemes for subsequent questions.

### **Question 3. What do supervisors need to know?**

Two themes emerged for Question 3. Supervisors emphasized the centrality of knowing how to support peer workers’ well-being and educating themselves or non-peer staff and administrators on the peer workers’ role and scope of practice.

#### **Peer Worker Well-Being**

Previously, we described the emotional challenges inherent in providing services to clients. Because of their lived experience, some supervisors said peer staff may, for example, overly extend themselves or become upset by the stories they hear from their peer clients.

“. . ., especially giving them space and time to process, knowing that not only is the work that we do heavy for all of us, it can also bring up our own stuff sometimes . . .”

Supervisors believe they need to attend to signs that a peer worker is struggling and intervene to prevent the peer worker from becoming unwell, which may lead to feelings of burnout or a relapse in their recovery.

“I think just being mindful of that each of our [peer workers] on our team currently, they’re on their own recovery journey, and so just being mindful of how work duties or work expectations might impact that as well.”

“Also, knowing each peer’s work tolerance, how much can they do? How much can they not do? I don’t want to push them so hard that it causes my peer [workers] to become too stressed and then become unhealthy.”

In addition to providing responsive supervision, as described previously, supervisors mentioned the importance of providing **flexibility in job tasks** that reflect their interests, skills, strengths, or stories.

#### **Peer Worker Role and Scope of Practice**

While the first theme—well-being—may not be unique to peer staff, the second theme was. In some organizations, it seems some peer supervisors, their organization, or both are unclear on what is within the peer workers’ scope of practice.

“This is very brand new to me of understanding which boundaries are appropriate and not appropriate for peer support. There’s been a lot of conversations about that . . . I think as a supervisor, initially, it would’ve been helpful for either myself to educate myself more on appropriate boundaries for peer support or to be given information on that.”

Another supervisor said,

“I guess I wish I would’ve had a better understanding of the boundaries and the differences between supervising a clinician of

some sort versus peer support, and just more clarification for myself on what that looked like.”

#### Question 4. What do supervisors find challenging?

Supervisors described six major challenges or themes.

Organizations:

- Can't **pay** peer workers what they deserve
- Don't understand the **peer staff role**
- Don't value **peer staff's contribution**
- Don't have adequate **coverage** or can't cover peer services when peer workers need time off

Supervisors:

- Don't have **enough time** to do everything that needs to be done
- Can't provide quality supervision when there is **too much distance** between them and peer workers

#### Fair Pay

Many supervisors said their inability to pay peer workers a fair wage is challenging. We address this theme more fully under Question 5.

#### Peer Worker Role and Scope of Practice

While some supervisors said they didn't understand peer workers' scope of practice (SoP) when they first started their position, other supervisors said administrators or other staff didn't understand the peer workers' SoP. They often used the phrase "scope" or "appropriate boundaries." Consequently, peer workers may have been asked to do things that were not in their SoP, including providing clinical interventions or non-peer specialist professional activities.

These boundary violations seemed to result from insufficient staff/coverage, insufficient

understanding of the peer specialist SoP, or a combination of the two.

"You want to make sure that people aren't being put in situations that are going against the actual scope of what they're there to do. Getting too clinical in certain situations . . . I think it's very important to have those boundaries so that we don't have a situation where things can go south just because it's like, we're short-staffed."

"We would like to think that their primary role is indeed supporting the family, but where we're short, we're short. In [our city] these days, our peer support [staff] is helping check in patients and supervising the children as their parent is meeting with the provider. . . We wear any hat that is given to us."

#### Peer Worker Contribution

Several supervisors in non-peer-run organizations seemed frustrated with how non-peer staff, including some administrators, perceived peer workers' contribution to the peer clients' well-being.

". . . it's the people above me that I have problems communicating with the importance of the peer support work . . . having people above me recognize that this work is truly important, but there's just that disconnect. They don't understand what my peer support[er] goes through, and they think it's just super easy, and it's definitely not."

"Sometimes people come from a more clinical background where the idea of self-disclosure is not encouraged at all, and you have a peer support role where that's the primary emphasis and really understanding the power of recovery that's a non-clinical role, but how it can be complimentary to the broader organization, if that makes sense."

Some supervisors thought their role included advocating for peer workers, and advocacy

resulted in peer workers being more fully integrated into the organization.

“Getting them [non-peer workers] on board with what we do and showing them and giving examples of how we have really helped bring together that clinical and that lived experience side for the betterment of the client because that’s what we’re all here for at the end of the day.”

“[Peer workers are now] getting emails from the clinical team, from upper management, “Hey, I heard you did such a great job with this person, can you help? I’ve got somebody that would really like to see you.” Just advocating. Supervisors, we’ve got to advocate. We’ve got to advocate even inside our own agency.”

### Coverage

Supervisors seemed to agree that coverage was an issue across organizations and didn’t just apply to peer workers. However, when peer workers were off, peer clients did not receive peer services or received peer services from someone—often the supervisor—who may not have lived experience or a relationship with the peer client.

“Stretching myself in 50 different directions can be really hard and overwhelming sometimes because if I’m covering for a staff who is out, plus needing to cover my own caseload and doing all of the supervisor work, . . .”

“. . . typically, you don’t have a deep bench, so to speak, . . . Not all organizations are blessed to have dozens of peers working that can be interchanged and whatnot if need be.”

“I can make that phone call. . . . [but peer workers] have related on a level that I may

“Supervisors, we’ve got to advocate. We’ve got to advocate even inside our own agency.”

not be able to and recognizing that limits the service that that individual is getting that week if the peer is out.”

### Too Much Distance

Peer workers may live in a different county than their supervisors or be assigned to multiple counties and are often on the road. This challenge may be especially acute for supervisors supervising FPSS. FPSS provide peer services to peers in different counties and school districts.

### Not Enough Time

While it is likely that most managers and supervisors feel they don’t have enough time to do everything well, peer supervisors may have the additional time requirement of providing on-the-job coaching. Many peer workers have not completed a degree that would have provided opportunities, such as internships, for processing difficult client cases, practicing core intervention skills, or developing written and oral communication skills. Consequently, some supervisors thought peer workers might need more impromptu or ongoing individualized education than non-peer workers to meet job expectations.

“That can be challenging just for my own time management too, because I love to make time for the team, but sometimes each week if there’s things that are popping up that need further training and sitting down and reviewing things, it can really take up a lot of time . . .”

### Question 5. What can supervisors (and others) do to retain peer workers?

Five themes emerged for Question 5. To retain peer workers, organizations need to provide:

- Provide fair pay
- Sustain funding for peer programs

- Provide benefits
- Provide career development
- Attend to peer staff's well-being by providing:
  - Emotional support
  - Flexible scheduling
  - Connection
  - Recognition

**Provide Fair Pay**

“Pay them a fair wage.”

Not surprisingly, supervisors thought higher wages or salaries would increase retention. Supervisors mentioned competing with other employers who could pay peer workers more money.

“I think an agency really has to look at the benefits they can offer that employee, and then competitive wages when you can go to any place in the town and get paid more than maybe what you do as a peer support, that can be really hard.”

“Hey, will you take on somebody else’s trauma for \$13 an hour?”

One supervisor, who also provided direct services to peers, said,

“And I would love to be able to do this for the rest of my life. However, when in my town you can go to Target and make \$15.50 to start, and my starting wage is much, much less, it’s hard in today’s economy to say, “Hey, will you take on somebody else’s trauma for \$13 an hour?”

Another supervisor reflected on why their peer support staff left:

“If I look at the last few of our peer supports that have left, it has been salary or hourly wages . . . We lose a lot of our peer supports maybe to an associate or an aide at school.”

Supervisors also described reasons why peer workers’ salaries were low:

- Organization’s job codes
- Iowa Medicaid reimbursement and cap

**Organization’s Job Codes**

A few supervisors attributed lower pay to how their organization coded the job—either the peer worker position didn’t meet the requirements of a specific job code, or the job code was defined so that it did not encroach on duties included in a higher-paying position.

“So I would again say fair compensation. That’s actually the reason why we lost our most recent peer support specialist because there wasn’t a way to increase compensation without blurring too many tasks between what some of our other roles do, and then it’s not fair to not pay [them] as much as other people if you’re asking [them] to do the same sort of job.”

“I’d say our biggest thing is being able to pay them a fair wage. We’ve gotten so much pushback from [organization] human resources that, hey, they don’t meet the requirements of this specific job code, or they have a felony. We want them because they have a felony. That’s the whole reason we’re hiring them.”

Some organizations, however, found ways to increase salaries.

“We start our pay at \$18 an hour, which really helps once they get nationally certified. There’s a raise for that. And then when you’re able to help train new staff coming on, and that’s a bump.”

**Iowa Medicaid Reimbursement and Cap**

Many supervisors mentioned Medicaid doesn’t provide adequate reimbursement, and they cap the number of hours they can bill Medicaid. They said Medicaid needed to increase their reimbursement rate and remove the cap on reimbursement.



“ . . . just the reimbursement rate for Medicaid is not what it should be for peer support, given the enormity and importance of the role that they play in people’s treatment overall in their treatment plans. That, I think is where the issue lies. If we’re not getting reimbursed, then we have to find funding elsewhere. That is not always easy.”

Supervisors sometimes linked low pay to policymakers or Medicaid undervaluing peer workers’ contribution to client recovery or well-being.

“ . . . but it’s super frustrating that we know the value of peer support and we know that there’s a focus to increase the peer workforce. I think that that is absolutely the direction that we should be going in, but it drives me crazy that there’s a cap for Medicaid services. We talk about the value and the importance and let’s move forward with this, but we’re not doing that with legislation and with rates and things like that. I do get very frustrated by that, and my organization is certainly supportive of peer support, but also, we have to be sustaining and we have to look at those bottom line things. It’s just, frustrating.”

### **Sustain Funding for Peer Programs**

Financial sustainability for peer services is a real challenge. Supervisors reported they need more support in leveraging non-Medicaid funding sources or documenting how to demonstrate the positive effect of their peer services to retain funding.

“We had a grant to cover non-Medicaid insured families, and that ended recently. Luckily, I mean, I work for a non-profit so the agency committed to use some of the fundraising dollars to cover the staff so we could continue serving anyone regardless of their insurance. But that’s a challenge.”

Some supervisors mentioned that their organization or peer programs will end when their grant ends. They don’t know how they will retain peer staff.

“ . . . my grant ends in a couple of years, . . . So, right now my people don’t know that they’re going to have a job in a couple of years. . . ., sustainability, that’s a struggle. What do I tell my people when we’re 100% grant-funded? Because in Iowa, Medicaid reimbursement is just terrible. So, I’ve been trying to figure out sustainability this whole time.

“Yeah, I can relate to [name] with the grant because our grant is going to run out in [year], and we’ll just be left with [type] dollars. And we’ll have to cut the staff once the grant goes away.”

A third supervisor said,

“Currently, we are grant-funded for our peer support folks. As we look towards a financial model for sustainability, it’s a lot of contact hours and time to be able to bill to pay their position. With no-show rates, et cetera, it makes it even a little trickier to make sure that they’re getting enough billable hours to help cover their salary because, as a nonprofit, we can’t afford to just pay people out of pocket.”

### **Provide Benefits**

While some supervisors were dubious about the likelihood they could offer higher salaries, supervisors offered ideas for increasing benefits that they thought might influence retention. Organizations could pay for conferences and other professional development. One organization paid for peer workers’ home Internet service. Supervisors thought peer workers should receive the same professional development funding as non-peer workers.

“Retaining is, for me, for my team, I believe they want to know how valuable they are and offering that continued education and, “Let’s continue to build your resume,” . . .”

“. . . incentives or support for professional development. There’s a statewide peer conference. Making sure there’s a way for peers to be able to attend that and other enrichment, the help. . . , just like how we do for any other profession, making sure that peers have the same thing that way, . . .

### **Provide Career Development**

In addition to paying for professional development, supervisors emphasized the importance of creating opportunities for peer workers to (a) **develop leadership skills or advance in their careers** and (b) **thrive in their positions**.

### **Leadership Development and Career Advancement**

Several supervisors talked about creating peer leaders within their organizations. When organizations provide leadership opportunities, peer workers are more likely to stay.

“. . . part of what we’re doing here is building leaders.”

“Also, I think it’s important to have advancement for peers in terms of within leadership in the organization specifically in other areas so that peers if they want to supervise and have other leadership roles on the team ... there’s a pathway for that.”

“Again, I wanted to talk about the whole leadership aspect. It’s like [name] talked about a career ladder. For me, I’m part of the leadership team for my center, so I’m in the room when those decisions are being made.”

And a third supervisor said:

“And [peer] staff here are very involved in the day-to-day type of planning and group planning. And they’re engaged at that level . . . And I think that that’s key, it’s part of what we’re doing here is building leaders.”

Career advancement might include changing positions within the organization.

“They really had a ladder or a step-up procedure at their agency. They made it so the staff could come in at that level and continue to grow and educate themselves and get degrees. They had a lot of their peer support then staying with them for years and years in different roles because of that.”

“. . . they have the ability to move into a different position if that’s what they want. . . . And so, the continued support and reminder that you can accomplish what you want to, I think is something that keeps people coming back to the office . . . supervisors to say, “No really, I could see you doing that.” . . . And we’ve had a lot of peers do that at the [organization], which is amazing to watch.

### **Thrive in Their Positions**

While less tangible than moving into a new position, supervisors pointed out that some peer workers are likely to stay if they are given the autonomy to create something new. Thriving included tapping into the peer workers’ strengths or gifts or letting them run with an idea.

“From a supervisor perspective, I think what has been really helpful is being able to help people develop their own ideas and giving them the freedom and then support to develop an idea and then run with it, whatever that might be, and just giving them the independence and the trust to believe that they’re going to be able to develop these things on their own ongoing, and like someone said earlier, maybe will lead to the next step of their careers.”

“. . ., but I think one of the things that I wish I would've realized coming into supervising peer recovery coaches is that with each of my hires came a warehouse of knowledge. To know that on the front end, to be able to start delegating sooner instead of waiting. And I don't know, it's just been amazing to me the wealth of knowledge that has come along from folks with lived experience . . .”

“That's what I hear a lot, giving our people trust and autonomy, not micromanaging, but really being able to sit with someone and give them something that maybe you didn't have. Or maybe you did have and you want to pass it on. Yeah, huge reason why people stay.”

### **Attend to Peer Workers' Socio-Emotional Well-Being**

Supervisors mentioned that organizations and supervisors who support peer workers' social and emotional well-being are more likely to retain peer workers. Supervisors discussed four subthemes:

- Emotional support
- Flexible scheduling
- Connection
- Recognition

#### **Emotional Support**

Peer workers, like other direct care service providers, are doing really hard work and may lose hope.

“. . . they feel like they're just not doing enough for the families. They give all these suggestions. They give all these resources, and the families just continue to struggle. . . . [that's] the biggest difficulty with being able to retain them. Almost like they get burnt out. So that compassion fatigue becomes really difficult.”

“I think as far as themselves being retained, it has more to do with the feeling of accomplishment, contributing to the vision of

recovery for our clients and being able to navigate when it doesn't work because it doesn't work a lot of the times, and we know that's how addiction works.”

Providing time to process client challenges, including feelings of frustration or demoralization when clients aren't making progress or relapse, may retain some peer workers. Supervisors also talked about how discussing work-life balance, not taking on too much (setting boundaries), and truly caring for their own well-being may retain some peers.

“When people have left, it has been often because, and it hasn't been a lot of people, but they become overwhelmed, which is probably with their home life and work, that balance and just overly involved, which falls back on me as a supervisor and making sure that they're setting those boundaries and not taking on too much where it is overwhelming.”

#### **Flexible Scheduling**

Supervisors thought flexible scheduling, fewer hours, or more hours would retain some peer workers.

“. . . we really emphasize self-care, and try to provide self-care activities a couple of times a month where they can really focus on taking care of self. So, I think that that is really important, and I think that is really helpful here is flexibility with scheduling . . .”

“Staff need flexibility. We've made our program really flexible, meet with your clients when it works for you and the client, not when we say so. Because they are, in our case, they're parent peer staff.”

#### **Connection**

Being part of a community is important for everyone but may be more challenging for

some peer workers because they may be the only peer staff in the organization or on a team.

“So, you’re working solo so much of the time, so they really need that time with other people doing this work, is one thing I would say.”

“Sometimes, peers can feel very lonely if it’s really just them in their department and they don’t have anyone else to really run things by and those sorts of things, so that’s also important for morale.”

Supervisors thought peer workers who felt connected to other people at work would be more likely to stay in their position.

“I think [they] really enjoyed just feeling supported and comfortable here, that [they are] a part of the whole team.”

“And then the team support and supervisor support, really people have said they’ve stayed because of that, the environment of support for the staff with other staff.”

Connection with other peer workers was also mentioned by supervisors several times.

“A big part of it is connection to other peers. Not just the connection to the people they’re working with, but it’s important to have that peer support for them as well so that they know they’re supported in that role to ask those questions, bounce ideas off of each other, share what they’re going through. I think that’s important for all of us to be connected to our work and have that meaningful, purposeful experience.”

### **Recognition**

Supervisors mentioned recognition may help some peer workers feel more connected to their organizations.

“I specifically point out how valuable [their] position is, and we look at examples of things that have gone well, success stories, so then [the peer worker] can each month reflect on the work [they are] doing.”

“Then if they do participate in speaking at a NAMI or speaking here, then making sure that I’m getting that information to marketing people so that our peers can be highlighted and recognized, that they’re going above and beyond . . .”

Recognition by administrators was also important to retention.

“. . ., but also we have lost staff because they do not feel valued by the administration, . . .”

“With our company, we’re very blessed to have an executive who really takes care of our staff. . . ., it’s not necessarily what [the peer worker] asks for [they] get, but just having that open ear and really trying to work around to make [them] happy with his job.”

When it comes to job satisfaction and retention, having a voice may be essential for some peer workers.

“I think it’s important for peers to feel like they have a voice within the leadership, within their organization and that their concerns are also being addressed on that level, and not just purely on a supervision level, but it goes throughout the whole culture and organization to see peers as just as integral and important and a part of the mission as a whole and have that be shown when it comes to the policies.”

“. . . it goes throughout the whole culture and organization to see peers as just as integral and important and a part of the mission . . .”

## Summary

Supervisors and their organizations play a vital role in supporting and retaining peer staff. Peer supervisors described high-quality supervision that meets peer workers' needs. Supervisors offered several recommendations to support and retain peer workers.

### How to Support Peer Support Workers

Administrators and supervisors need to:

- Provide ongoing training and on-the-job coaching
- Ensure all employees understand the peer worker's role, scope of practice (what peer workers are trained to do), and contribution to peer clients' well-being
- Provide responsive supervision

Responsive supervision includes three critical supervisor behaviors:

- Be available
- Provide time to debrief difficult peer client challenges and give feedback
- Support their emotional well-being

To provide responsive supervision, organizations need to ensure supervisors have adequate time to provide supervision and ongoing job coaching, especially supervisors supervising peer workers at a distance.

### How to Retain Peer Support Workers

Only one research report described factors related to peer worker retention (University of Maryland, 2021). The results of their study are consistent with our findings. The most important factor was to pay them more.

- **Provide fair pay.** Supervisors described strategies to ensure higher or fair pay:
  - Revise their organizations' job codes
  - Advocate for an increase in the Iowa Medicaid reimbursement rate
  - Advocate for the removal or adjustment of the Medicaid reimbursement cap

- Secure non-Medicaid funding sources, including grants and contracts, and raise funds from the local community.

Supervisors described two other factors they thought affected retention.

- **Provide career development opportunities,** including leadership development and career advancement opportunities.
- **Attend to peer workers' socio-emotional well-being.** Attending to peer workers' well-being included:
  - Provide emotional support
  - Provide flexible scheduling to help workers maintain work-life balance
  - Create opportunities for peer workers to feel connected to non-peer staff and other peer workers
  - Recognize peer worker contributions

## Next Steps for the IPWC

### The IPWC Peer Supervisor Training

The results have implications for the IPWC's Peer Supervisor Training:

- Review national guidelines for peer supervision (e.g., "Pillars of Peer Supervision") and other State curricula.
- Determine the best format to provide peer supervisor training. We are considering offering an online, four-part series that would lead to an Iowa Peer Supervisor Certificate.
- Meet with peer supervisor trainers to discuss format and topics.
- Prioritize training topics that are relevant for peer supervisors in all settings (viz., peer- and non-peer-run organizations).
- Write learning outcomes and outcome measures.

### The 2024 Statewide Peer Workforce Study

The results have implications for writing survey items.

- Survey peer support workers. Ask them to describe their experiences and factors related to their intention to stay or leave their organization.
- Survey supervisors. Ask them what supervisor training topics they are most interested in.

- Laura Semprini, Remote Peer Support Coordinator, [NAMI Johnson County](#)

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