

MODEL POLICY FOR FIRST RESPONDER PEER SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Provided by the Washington State Criminal Justice
Training Commission for all first response agencies in
Washington State



Model Policy for First Responder Peer Support Programs

Model Policy Note:

This model policy is provided to assist first response agencies with establishing an agency-specific policy for a Peer Support Program. In accordance with RCW 5.60.060, this is intended for law enforcement, corrections, fire, emergency medical services, emergency dispatch, coroner/medical examiner, and co-response agencies. This model policy contains the key foundational elements necessary for a strong and sustainable Peer Support Program, based upon current best practices. It is intended to be a guide for agencies as they create their own agency-specific peer support policy. While there is no requirement to use this model policy as a guide, it is highly recommended to ensure Peer Support Programs across Washington state are meeting consistent standards. Existing Peer Support Programs are encouraged to compare their current policy to this model policy and make modifications, where necessary. As best practices change and/or feedback is received, this model policy will be revised and republished.

Peer Support Program Policy for (Your Agency)

Summary

The Peer Support Program is a confidential, non-clinical support service provided by trained agency personnel to assist first responders and support staff in managing personal and professional challenges. This program promotes mental wellness, reduces the stigma surrounding seeking help, and connects members with appropriate resources when needed. The program operates under the principles of confidentiality, compassion, and professionalism. It is proactive and prioritizes the well-being of the employee for continued service in their profession and a healthy retirement.

This policy establishes guidelines for the operation, roles, and responsibilities of the Peer Support Program to ensure consistency, confidentiality, and effectiveness in supporting the mental health and well-being of first responders and all personnel working for first response agencies.

Scope

This policy applies to all employees and volunteers within the agency, including administrators, support staff, and all vocational disciplines.

Overview

The Peer Support Team comprises selected agency personnel who have received specialized training in peer support, active listening, crisis response, and referral practices.

Peer Support Team Members are not licensed mental health providers. Employees will be provided information on professional referral resources if/when mental health signs and symptoms may arise. Peer Support Team Members will be trained to identify the signs and symptoms of individuals needing professional assistance and how to triage appropriately. Peer Support Team Members are trained colleagues who offer support within the boundaries of their specific role and training.

The Peer Support Program is designed to complement existing resources, including internal and external support such as the Employee Assistance Program, clinical mental health services, chaplaincy, and related resources. Peer Support Team Members provide voluntary, proactive emotional support to agency personnel and actively participate in the agency's response to critical incidents when peer support is requested. They are educated and trained to identify

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situations that require additional intervention and facilitate referrals to licensed mental health professionals when applicable. They are also educated and trained to identify when a situation may include acute or imminent risk and how to triage as safely and effectively as possible.

Purpose

The purpose of the Peer Support Team is to serve as an integral resource to the agency to foster and support positive mental health and well-being among agency personnel. Core goals of the Peer Support Team include:

- 1. Enhance Mental Health and Well-Being**

Foster a supportive environment that proactively promotes the emotional, mental, and psychological well-being of all agency personnel. Offer day-to-day and incident-specific support to employees experiencing personal or professional stress or challenges. Create positive relationships with personnel and proactively address stressors and challenges to improve morale and reduce the likelihood of burnout and vocational stress. Foster a culture of health promotion and resilience, support ongoing education on mental health topics, and advocate for wellness initiatives within the agency.

- 2. Promote Resilience**

Strengthen individual and team resilience to effectively manage common stressors and improve well-being in spite of adversity.

- 3. Provide Support and Improve Access to Resources**

Provide confidential, non-judgmental emotional support and connection to appropriate resources. Recognize when additional resources, such as clinical mental health services, may be appropriate and help employees access those resources.

- 4. Reduce Stigma**

Encourage openness and acceptance around mental health by normalizing conversations about stress, trauma, wellness, resilience, and effective resource utilization.

- 5. Maintain Confidentiality and Trust**

Build and sustain trust by adhering to strict confidentiality protocols outlined in this policy to ensure personnel feel safe accessing supportive resources.

- 6. Support Critical Incident Response**

Provide immediate and ongoing support following critical incidents to help personnel process their experiences and mitigate potential impacts. Be an integral part of the agency's response to critical incidents, including assisting with debriefings, when

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necessary, in conjunction with mental health professionals and ensuring timely support is available.

7. **Evaluate and Improve Program Effectiveness**

Participate in providing feedback for the Peer Support Program regularly, including gathering and delivering feedback from agency personnel to Peer Support Program leaders, and collaborating to implement improvements to meet evolving needs.

8. **Support the Peer Support Team Members**

Provide and disseminate applicable resources, training, and group support opportunities to help Peer Support Team Members maintain their effectiveness and emotional well-being. Give consideration to the duration of service by Peer Support Team Members, and particularly the Peer Support Team Coordinator, to reduce the potential for burnout.

General Procedure and Member Selection

Peer Support Team Members shall be designated by the agency executive, and a current roster of team members shall be maintained by the agency. In addition to this policy, the agency will create and supply its Peer Support Team with a Guidebook and Standard Operating Procedures. These resources are intended to serve as a guide for Peer Support Team Members and provide them with the mission, objectives, detailed responsibilities, list of vetted resources, details of team structure, skills for providing support, and other tools for use as a Peer Support Team Member. These resources should also include the values of the organization as they relate to their role of a Peer Support Team Member. These resources should be maintained and updated regularly by the agency and/or Peer Support Team leadership, in collaboration with other relevant Peer Support Team Members, and approved through the designated chain of command for the Peer Support Team.

Necessary funds will be allocated for training, maintenance, and program support to ensure the success of the Peer Support Team. This budget will be reviewed and approved on an annual basis. The program budget should be guided by a commitment to program growth, sustainability, and the overall wellness of the organization, with additional consideration given to the current culture, preventative health and long-term needs.

1. **Roles and Responsibilities**

Peer Support Team Members serving on the agency's Peer Support Team shall:

- a. Provide emotional support, active listening, and knowledge of and referrals to appropriate resources.
- b. Maintain confidentiality unless a threat to life or other mandatory reporting requirements arises.

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- c. Refer individuals to vetted professional resources when applicable.
- d. Participate in debriefings, when necessary.
- e. Participate in regular team meetings and program evaluations to ensure ongoing effectiveness.

2. Oversight

A designated Peer Support Team Coordinator or mental health provider shall oversee the Peer Support Team. This individual shall be appointed by the organization's executive. In addition to the Peer Support Team Coordinator, the agency must have clinical oversight and professional consultation from a licensed mental health professional who is both qualified and culturally competent. The agency and the mental health professional should mutually determine the scope and nature of this role. The coordinator should collaborate with advisors (including Human Resources, mental health professionals, other qualified health professionals, legal counsel, and other related collaborators and stakeholders) as appropriate to fulfill responsibilities of the position, as outlined below:

- a. Maintain the Peer Support Team roster.
- b. Recruit and coordinate the selection process for personnel who express interest in joining the Peer Support Team.
- c. Create and maintain reports or data related to Peer Support Team activity, including training, budget tracking, number of contacts by Peer Support Team Members, and other information that demonstrates the effectiveness, efficiency, and value of the program. Under no circumstances should the creation, collection or maintenance of this data contribute to a violation of the individual confidentiality fundamental to the program.
- d. Review complaints by agency members regarding the actions of any Peer Support Team Member.
- e. Develop, maintain, and/or identify a vetted resource list (including contact information) for Peer Support Team Members to utilize in referring members who may need further assistance.
- f. Coordinate annual and quarterly training for Peer Support Team Members including adherence to current recommended best practices for first responder peer support teams and team members.
- g. Offer guidance and leadership to agency Peer Support Team Members.
- h. Additional duties as assigned in accordance with the guidelines outlined in the Peer Support Program manual.

3. Selection Process

Peer Support Team Members are carefully selected based on their character, integrity, decision-making skills, and interpersonal communication abilities. A consistent selection process ensures that team members are well-suited to offer compassionate, ethical,

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and appropriate peer support within the agency. It is recommended that a team be as diversified as possible, relative to the size, needs, existing culture, and structure of the agency. There should be particular attention to diversity among rank and role to ensure as many employees as possible have an appropriate peer on the team.

- a. Candidates must express interest in joining the Peer Support Program and demonstrate their abilities and commitment to the program through a formal application process.
- b. The Peer Support Team Coordinator and representatives from agency leadership will review candidates' qualifications, including input from supervisors and peers.
- c. An interview process will include members of the Peer Support Team and, whenever possible, a licensed mental health professional affiliated with the program.

4. Eligibility Criteria

To be considered for serving on the agency's Peer Support Team, individuals must:

- a. Be in good standing within the agency. Any disciplinary actions taken against them within the past year of service with the organization should be reviewed and considered.
- b. Have served a minimum of one non-probationary year in the agency (exceptions may apply).
- c. Have demonstrated a willingness to assist and support others.
- d. Reliably demonstrate professionalism, trustworthiness, and interpersonal skills. Their reputation represents the organization in a positive light.

Additional considerations for selection may include:

- a. Communication skills
- b. Problem solving ability
- c. Demonstrated teamwork and collaboration
- d. Emotional intelligence
- e. Recommendations from supervisors and/or colleagues
- f. Previous education, training, or experience in peer support or related fields
- g. Personal qualities including maturity, good judgment, professional ethics, professionalism, and credibility among peers
- h. Success in navigating and resolving their own significant professional and personal challenges

5. Training and Readiness

Selected candidates must complete an approved peer support training program which has been determined by the agency to be consistent with current best practices for peer

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support training. New team members should receive this initial training within six months of being selected to join the team, when possible. Team members will participate in continuing education and training pertinent to serving as a peer support team member. Additional training requirements may be required based on specific agency guidelines.

6. Removal of Team Members

Team members may be removed from the program if they fail to maintain the standards or responsibilities expected of their role or engage in actions that compromise the program's integrity. Members may resign from the team at any time by providing a written resignation from their position as a Peer Support Team Member to the Peer Support Team Coordinator.

Special Considerations

Agencies with limited personnel or resources are encouraged to participate in regional Peer Support Teams to enhance confidentiality, promote rank diversity among team members, and expand access to resources. This model may be especially important in rural areas and in settings with low average tenure.

1. Confidentiality Protocols

- a. All participating agencies must adopt and sign a shared confidentiality agreement aligned with legal requirements and participating agency guidelines.
- b. Team members shall receive standardized training on inter-agency confidentiality expectations.
- c. Each peer support interaction must be documented in accordance with the participating agency procedures, while ensuring that confidentiality protections remain intact.

2. Shared Access to Resources

A joint list of vetted providers and wellness resources shall be maintained and updated based on each agency's guidebook.

3. Training and Standards

- a. All regional Peer Support Team Members must meet the same training and certification standards as outlined in the joint policy.
- b. Joint regional trainings must be held at least annually to ensure consistency in approach, messaging, and practices.

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4. Deployment and Communication Protocols

A written deployment protocol must define how Peer Support Team responses are requested and assigned across agencies.

5. Program Review

- a. Regular check-ins should be conducted with Peer Support Team Members.
 - b. Oversight of the regional Peer Support Program should be shared among participating agencies and documented in a memorandum of understanding (MOU).
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Access to Peer Support Services

1. Self-Referral

- a. Employees can directly contact a Peer Support Team Member to request assistance.
- b. All agency personnel will have easy access to contact information for Peer Support Team Members, including the Peer Support Team Coordinator.

2. Indirect Referral

Concerned coworkers, friends, or family members can refer employees to the Peer Support Team if they notice someone in need. However, services offered by the Peer Support Team are entirely optional and voluntary.

Delivery of Peer Support Services

1. Availability

- a. Peer Support Team Members must be easily accessible to all employees seeking assistance. A current list of team members will be shared agency wide.
- b. Communication with Peer Support Team Members is considered strictly confidential, except in specific, clearly defined circumstances (see Confidentiality section).

2. Operational Requirements

- a. Supervisory approval is needed if utilization of peer support requires an employee or team member to leave their assigned duty.
- b. Off-duty team members providing unexpected support must notify their supervisor to ensure proper timekeeping and potential compensation, as applicable depending on specific agency requirements.

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3. Limits of Peer Support

- a. Team members should understand their personal and professional limits and refer individuals to other appropriate resources when appropriate. Team member shall not operate outside of their defined scope or training.
 - b. When possible and practical, newly hired personnel should be introduced to the Peer Support Team, or representatives thereof, during the onboarding, training, and fieldwork phases.
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Addressing Role Conflicts

1. Maintaining Boundaries

Team members must avoid relationships that could compromise their objectivity, effectiveness, or professionalism, such as financial, sexual, or religious conflicts with those they support or supervise. Training for Peer Support Team Members will address the complexities of managing boundaries while serving in a peer support role. Peer Support Team Members shall work to minimize conflicting relationships and refer employees to others, as appropriate, to reduce potential conflicts.

2. Referring to Other Support Resources

In cases of potential role conflicts or frequent interactions with the same individual, team members should consider referring employees to another team member and/or other applicable resources (e.g., chaplain or mental health professional).

3. Supervisory Considerations

Supervisors participating in the program must balance their peer support role with their responsibilities as a supervisor to report workplace issues, such as harassment or discrimination, in compliance with agency policies.

Confidentiality and Privilege

All members of the Peer Support Team shall receive the necessary pre-requisite training to competently participate as functioning members of the Peer Support Team. An employee whom the Peer Support Team has contacted is under no obligation to receive the services offered by the Peer Support Team. Peer support is entirely optional and voluntary. In providing peer support services, Peer Support Team Members shall avoid becoming involved in any criminal activity related to an employee's specific situation or disclosure. Peer Support communication is considered strictly confidential, subject to the following exceptions:

1. Imminent harm to the individual or to others
2. Suspected abuse or neglect of a child (RCW 26.44)

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3. Suspected abuse, neglect, exploitation, or harm of a vulnerable adult (RCW 74.34)

Peer Support Team Members must fully understand and appreciate the concepts of confidentiality and privilege. Team members must maintain the confidentiality of all peer support communications and strictly adhere to the rules governing peer support privilege, as outlined in RCW 5.60.060.

1. **Confidentiality:**

- a. Confidentiality is the professional, ethical, or moral duty to refrain from disclosing private and sensitive information without the individual's consent to whom it pertains.
- b. Peer Support Team Members have a duty of confidentiality to their peers when confidential information is shared within the bounds of the peer support relationship.
- c. Failure to maintain confidentiality can erode trust, alienate peers, and negatively impact the success and goals of the agency's Peer Support Program.

2. **Privilege:**

- a. Privilege is the right of an individual to refuse to disclose or prevent another person from disclosing confidential communications in a legal proceeding, as provided in RCW 5.60.060(6).
- b. All team members are expected to complete peer support training conducted by an approved trainer or provider and to understand and adhere to the rules governing the Peer Support Privilege statute, as outlined in RCW 5.60.060, including:
 - i. What constitutes peer support communication
 - ii. What conditions and requirements must be met
 - iii. What statutory exceptions to the privilege exist
- c. Peer Support privilege can greatly benefit individuals within the agency, provided the rules governing the statute are followed. Therefore, all Peer Support Team Members must ensure that peer support communications are conducted within the bounds of and entirely consistent with Washington State law.

Training

Peer Support Team Members must advance their skills through continuing education and training, as scheduled by the Peer Support Team Coordinator. It is recommended that Peer Support Team Members receive at least two hours of continuing education and training on a quarterly basis. Relevant introductory and continuing education and training for team members should cover the following and/or related topics:

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1. **Confidentiality & Privilege**
 - a. Peer Support disclosure requirements
 - b. Confidentiality 101
 - c. Privileged Communication

 2. **Agency Policies and Procedures**
 - a. Overview of the agency's standard operating procedures
 - b. Familiarity with the Peer Support Team Guidebook and resource list

 3. **Ethical Issues**
 - a. Complexity of roles for Peer Support Team Members
 - b. Evidence-based practices
 - c. Understanding the Peer Support Team Member's scope of training and when to make recommendations for additional help and support

 4. **Mental Health-Related Topics and Resources**
 - a. Recognizing suicide warning signs, assessing suicide risk and triaging appropriately and effectively; Peer Support Team Member best practices and legal requirements for reporting of self-harm or disclosure of suicidal ideation, method, plan, and/or intent
 - b. Substance use or alcohol use disorder awareness
 - c. Vocational stress and burnout prevention
 - d. Improving motivation
 - e. Improving help-seeking
 - f. Establishing and maintaining healthy wellness routines (e.g., nutrition, fitness, sleep)
 - g. Effective emotional regulation and relaxation techniques
 - h. Trauma, vicarious trauma, secondary trauma, post-traumatic stress, and post-traumatic growth
 - i. Compassion fatigue and its prevention
 - j. Interpersonal health and thriving
 - k. Understanding the different levels of care available in the mental health profession

 5. **Communication skills**
 - a. Basic crisis communication and de-escalation techniques
 - b. Effective and transparent communication strategies for building trust and rapport

 6. **Agency-specific training**
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Program Integrity

The Peer Support Program is an essential resource for agency personnel. Ensuring its success requires agency commitment, clear expectations, proper training, and ongoing evaluation. By maintaining high standards of professionalism, confidentiality, and accessibility, the program will continue to effectively meet the needs of agency personnel. Any sensitive information or outcomes collected regarding Peer Support Team activities should not include individually identifiable information (such as employee names, employee numbers, titles, etc.) in order to create a culture of confidentiality, trust, and safety within the agency.