What do Peers do?
Responding to the needs of People Who Use Drugs in Oregon

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Peers are people with lived experience, certified by the state, who help with basic needs, harm reduction supplies, emotional and crisis support, and connections to substance use treatment and recovery services.

Behavioral Health Resource Networks funded by Measure 110 hired Peer recovery support specialists (“peers”) statewide.

Background: Study Participants

- 13 individual/group interviews (60-90 minutes)
- 22 peers, 4 peer supervisors
- 8 counties represented
- 4 tri-county-focused interviews

Included:
- Peer-run organizations
- Culturally specific, Latinx and youth-focused organizations

Findings
What do Peers do?

- Outreach (streets, encampments, other locations)
- One-on-One visits with clients
- Attend appointments with clients
- Drop-in hours
- Crisis support
- Goal setting with clients and follow-up
- Paperwork and administrative work

Peer work involves engaging people and finding ways to connect people to resources they need—everything “from socks to detox”

No normal days

A typical workday? ... Oh, we don’t have normal around here.

So yeah, what does a typical day look like? There’s so many variables.

My responsibility is to ... [find] resources in the community that they couldn't otherwise know for themselves that are out there and build relationships with those agencies. So as people are speaking, light bulbs are going off in my head like, oh, I know what agency does that and I know what referral to fill out to get that person into that program.
As long as it's not illegal or immoral, I'll help you with it. I mean there's really not many limits on what I'll help somebody with, whether it's helping them get food stamps or enrolling for college.

That's where I relate with the best. I relate with people struggling in active addiction and people new in recovery and people in recovery better than I can relate to a room full of college educated people. I feel more out of place with them and I feel perfectly fine in a homeless camp. I just feel comfortable. I understand why they’re doing what they’re doing, and I also know that there’s a way out of it when they’re ready.

But a lot of people also just come in just to hang out sometimes. We have multiple people that live in a recovery house and are working and they're in that position because of the work that we have done for them. **They view this as a safe place to be**, so they utilize the drop-in center.
As long as they're following through and making that contact, we'll still work with them and support them with getting connected to other resources in the community or to help them find housing or all of that stuff. So even though people might slip, we don't just wash our hands of them. You know what I mean? We're still there to support them.

Service gaps include:
- **Housing**
- **Withdrawal management**
- **Long-term residential treatment**

- Keep calling, faxing and working local connections
- Offer clients other services:
  - Medication for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD)
  - Outpatient resources
  - Support groups
- Continue to build relationships and work on clients’ goals

Peers see the criminal legal system as one path to recovery but know that it is not everyone's path.

Since Measure 110, peers still connect to clients upon release from jail, after law enforcement interactions, and through courts.

Peers are engaging people outside of criminal legal systems.

[Measure 110 has] made recovering out loud more than a possibility. The stigma is a little bit less, I feel like. **People are more willing to get help when they know that they're not going to be facing prison time for admitting that they're addicts**, that they're not going to be looked on as if they're just criminals or a lost cause. I feel like that's a big part of it because I know early on in my addiction was before Measure 110, and it was a vicious cycle.

Organizations Can Take Steps to Support Peers

- Make sure peer caseloads are manageable
- Provide funding for training and certification
- Support peers in balancing administrative and client-facing work
- Provide peers with leadership roles
- Offer wellness days and employee assistance programs

Demand for services can be high and continuous participant engagement, outreach, and crisis encounters can cause burnout

Community and mutual support helps peers

...One of the best antidotes to burnout is community. Is actually being able to talk to your coworkers about what's going on. This person on your caseload who's weighing heavily on you, can we brainstorm around this? Or just like, "Ah, man, this work is hard, isn't it? Can we just talk about that?" I think that community is so nourishing and to help one another remember why we're doing this. How do we go on?

### Summary

#### Characteristics of Peer Work
- Intense dedication and workloads
- Peers problem-solve with limited resources
- Peers build affinity with people that over time facilitates change

#### Problem Solving Service Gaps
- Limited housing, withdrawal management and residential treatment
- Peers stay in contact when services are hard to access
- Peers offer alternatives

#### Ways to Support Peer Work
- Adequate staffing to reduce caseloads
- Funding for training and certification
- Skills/career advancement and leadership roles
- Community, networking

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