

Forensic Mental Health Insider

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Forensic Peer Support: What is it?

By: Xavier Justice, Certified Clinical Correctional Chaplain

According to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, peer support is an evidence-based model of a continuum of care services offered by a qualified and competent provider, who has also recovered from a physical, mental, and/or substance use disorder. Peer services can also be provided by the friends and family of, and advocates for, those experiencing a physical, mental, and/or SUD (CMS, 2007).

Forensic peer support is a subspecialty of peer support, and can be provided by people that have themselves recovered from justice-involvement, and by advocates, family, and friends of those who have experienced justice-involvement (PMHCA, 2011).

Peer support specialists are people that have been trained to counsel or assist others with the condition that they have recovered from (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). They help people meaningfully engage in the recovery process and reduce relapse. They effectively and efficiently extend the reach of treatment beyond the clinical setting into the everyday environment of those seeking recovery (SAMHSA, 2023).

Peers respond as bridges linking people to services. They also work 1-on-1 as role models, mentors, coaches, and advocates (Mental Health America, 2023). Forensic peers provide *hope* to the formerly justice involved by disclosing pathways to community inclusion through employment, housing, and other essential features for well-being (Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal, 2020).

I have developed a few principles to superintend my forensic practice over the last twenty years. These principles conceptualize the salient features of effective forensic peer support and form a roadmap for other practitioners to follow. *The 5 R's of effective forensic peer support are:*

Re-entry: the process of ending, and learning to live without, custody and control sanctions. Re-entry is largely achieved through establishing appropriate relationships in the community and building a robust network of helpers in various capacities that won't hold the justice-involvement history against the client.

Rehabilitation: the process of regaining and improving total functioning to achieve and maintain the activities of daily living. Regulation helps the client to build and express all kinds of resiliency skills when things get tough, and the client doesn't get his/her way.

Recovery: the process of change toward improving overall health, wellness, and upward mobility. Stopping bad behaviors and starting to do good behaviors takes time. Having a healthy routine is essential to helping establish new, good behavior habits, which is the key to recovery.

Reintegration: the process of finding identity, purpose, and mission inside community. As the client sets out to find his/her tribe, s/he will need lots of reassurance and coaching in order to positively participate in community life, growth and development.

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Reconciliation: the process of righting wrongs, being restored and living in harmony with others.

A former justice involved client must transition to and live a *new normal*, requiring a higher level of rationality. The client must choose the right interests and then pursue them in such a way that others are not impacted unlawfully. Correctly addressing and dealing with one's own offenses toward others and those made against the client is essentials.

Research has demonstrated positive, measurable outcomes from the development & implementation of a wide array of peer support services and the integration of these services into a comprehensive continuum of care (APA, 2018).

People with former justice involvement have higher recovery rates from mental health and SUDs as well as lower incidence of recidivism when they participate in forensic peer support. (SAMHSA, 2017).

About the Author

Chaplain Xavier Justice is an advanced board-certified chaplain, supervisor, and educator. He holds the certified clinical correctional chaplain from the American Correctional Chaplain Association. He is a licensed clinical alcohol and drug counselor and a state approved clinical supervisor. He holds the clinically certified forensic counselor, master addiction counselor, and master clinical traumatologist credentials. He is a state-level trainer in forensic peer support, supervisor and education provider. He is also a national psychiatric rehabilitation trainer, supervisor and education provider.

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