

A Significant Solution for Maternal Mental Health: Certified Peer Specialists

Nearly 1 in 5^{1,2} women struggle with maternal mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression, yet most go untreated.^{2,3} Though maternal mental health has garnered increased attention over recent years, women continue to experience a lack of consistent and accessible



standard of care in the United States, in part due to a scarcity of qualified and financially-accessible mental health providers.

The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) as of October 2020 noted over 5700 mental health professional shortage areas exist in the U.S.³ These shortage areas contribute to the fewer than half of those with mental illness being able to receive care, as seen in a 2014 Substance Abuse and Mental Health

Services Administration (SAMHSA) survey cited by the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL).⁴

The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these gaps in care, given the growing need for mental health services. According to The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) August 2020 findings, 40.9% of U.S. adults reported struggling with poor mental health or substance abuse related to the COVID-19 pandemic in late June 2020,⁵ almost twice the number of U.S. adults having any mental illness in 2019 (20.6%).⁶

In response to this provider shortage and growing need, there has been recent interest in the utilization of certified peer specialists to combat poor mental health. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) initially cited the efficacy of peer support programs in 2007, defining peer services as “an evidence-based mental health model of care which consists of a qualified peer support provider who assists individuals with their recovery from mental illness.”⁷ In addition to the CMS, peer support has been nationally recognized by other federal agencies such as SAMHSA and HRSA and endorsed by organizations like Mental Health America.

Historically, certified peer specialists have been utilized in particular populations or community settings, such as for those with substance use disorders, or veterans. Peer specialists have been found to be effective in reducing anxiety and depression in pregnant and postpartum women as well,⁸ making peer support a promising intervention for maternal mental illness.

Certified Peer Support Works

Peer support care models alleviate the burden of mental health both on individuals and the U.S. healthcare system through a variety of mechanisms:

- As certified peer specialists typically are of the communities they work within, they decrease stigma, enhance cultural competency in care, and increase community access.
- They provide cost-effective services and support by preventing hospitalizations and offering lower treatment costs.
- Peer support providers can help overcome Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) community mistrust of clinical settings and providers due to traumas of historical and present individual, institutional and systemic racism. This work is especially important as BIPOC women are at heightened risk of lack of access to quality treatment due to various social, economic, and political factors such as racism, sexism, and financial insecurity.⁹



Further, racially and ethnically diverse communities face higher rates of under-treatment,¹⁰ even though women of color suffer from poor maternal mental health at higher rates than white women. One study found 38% of mothers of color experienced postpartum depression, as compared with 12% of white women.¹¹

Certified peer specialists supplement the mental health provider shortage, are billable in most states, provide an emerging opportunity for support within maternal mental health, and have the potential to provide meaningful career pathways.

Peer specialists have lived experience similar to those of their target population, which helps them to understand and directly relate to those they are supporting; this is a different and important nuance from clinical care. Certified peers are those with formal training and testing in the provision of peer support services, in addition to having lived experience.

What Peer Support Looks Like

Different components within peer support exist, including emotional, informational, instrumental, and affiliation supports.¹² Emotional support involves feelings of empathy, camaraderie, and care, while informational, instrumental, and affiliation support focus on providing resources. Informational support includes providing connections and referrals to health and wellness resources through care navigation; instrumental support provides access to concrete supports such as housing; and affiliation support connects individuals with community resources like communal activities and events. Through these pathways, certified peer specialists can augment the care of those with poor mental health.

2020 Mom's Pilot Study

2020 Mom and partner organizations administered a pilot study published in 2020,¹³ which illuminated that existing state-sanctioned, certified peer support specialist training could be utilized as a starting point to train mothers who likely suffered from a maternal mental health disorder as peer specialists.

The pilot study consisted of a two-week training program for peer support specialists to become

certified, and was held in Austin, Texas and Phoenix, Arizona. Participants attended basic training in peer support which was already offered by the training/certifying body in each state, and a separate maternal mental health training that our team provided at the completion of this basic training.

Peer Support at Women's Health Innovations: A Case Study

Peer specialists certified through 2020 Mom's Pilot Study are now employed by Women's Health Innovations (WHI), a non-profit behavioral health organization in Arizona. After the women who WHI recruited for the peer training completed the training and certification process, WHI became a Medicaid provider in order to bill for peer services. The certified peer specialists working for WHI are paid as staff and have also been trained by WHI to assist in triaging cases, so mothers with the greatest need can be seen by a clinical professional more expeditiously. These peers are also providing support and resources to women both before and during clinical treatment. The clinic's director reports that clinical staff, patients and peers have reported high levels of satisfaction with the use of certified peers as a means for improving timely access to the right type of services at the right time.

Peers who were trained through the pilot reported increased knowledge and confidence in the provision of maternal mental health support, as well as high satisfaction with the training.

One hundred percent of participants reported utilizing information from the training in their work. The pilot study overall confirmed that

certified peer specialist training can be catered for maternal mental health in particular and has the potential to provide meaning in paid work for those who become certified.

Training, Financing, and Certification

While the use of certified peer support specialists for mental health and/or substance use disorders are well-recognized as being efficacious, training and certification differs widely at the state level. Forty-nine (49) states have state sanctioned certification programs (all but CO). However some states limit their training to substance use (for example Washington state) or provide Medicaid reimbursement for substance use disorders only (for example Ohio) at this time. Addressing such state limitations is a priority for 2020 Mom. Twenty (20) states require training/certification be conducted by a state-run training body.¹⁴ An average certification consists of 548 hours of practice in peer work and 50 hours of specialized training, according to a



National Analysis of Peer Support Providers from the University of Michigan Behavioral Health Workforce Research Center.¹⁵ Such certifications are usually concluded with evaluations of knowledge and proficiency such as written tests. Peer certification credentials typically need to be renewed every one to two years.¹⁶ In addition to state-based certifications, some national organizations offer peer support specialist training, including Mental Health America.¹⁷ For 2020 Mom's pilot study, Via Hope (TX) and RI

International (AZ) provided the peer specialist training and certification, while Women’s Health Innovations of Arizona provided the training on maternal mental health.



State Medicaid Reimbursement of Certified Peer Support

Similar to certified peer specialist certification standards, billing for certified peer support is not standardized. Medicaid is the largest provider of funds for peer support services, after CMS recognized its efficacy in 2007. Thirty-nine (39) states allow Medicaid billing for certified peer support, as of 2018.¹⁸ Twenty-three (23) states of those 39 allow reimbursement specifically for individuals with substance abuse and mental health disorders. Twelve (12) states only grant reimbursement for mental health peer support; four (4) only permit addiction reimbursement.¹⁹

Non-Medicaid Reimbursement

Beyond Medicaid, certified peer support specialist programs can be funded by federal funds, foundation grants, and a mixture of these and other funds,²⁰ though the challenge with this funding is sustainability.

Very few private insurers offer coverage for certified peer support. In 2019, Aetna became one of the first to do so, offering this service through a singular telehealth contract, rather than through peers hired by health care clinics.²¹

While a step in the right direction, ideally any in-network mental health or primary care provider (including obstetricians) would be able to bill for certified peer support specialist time, to promote optimal care coordination and continuity of care by a peer familiar with community resources.

Challenges and Next Steps

Certified peer support is a promising intervention for maternal mental health services, as found to be effective for substance abuse and mental health more generally. In this growing field, however, challenges and next steps remain. State sanctioned training and certifying bodies in all states will need to adapt trainings to incorporate evidence based curriculum for maternal mental health, similar to the training provided in the 2020 Mom pilot study; as well as adapting the training layout to meet the needs of mothers, which might include 5-hour training days offered virtually vs 8-hour in-person trainings. Additionally assistance in helping behavioral health clinics and community based organizations who may not be billing insurance currently, but who wish to employ certified peers, in understanding how to become Medicaid providers in their states, as well as learning how to bill for services, will be necessary.

Novel methods to systematically scale use of certified peer support should be explored, including in large health settings and through community-based partners like the YMCA,²² through doula organizations, and other avenues.

Funding for certified peer support services must be evaluated routinely and increased as needed to ensure that peers can earn a living wage.

2020 Mom’s pilot identified a need for professional support post-training, and additional professional paths. While peer support is evidence-based, more programmatic infrastructure may be needed to further propel use of certified peer specialists.

Comprehensive State Resource Center

Copeland Center's "Doors to Wellbeing" program maintains a comprehensive database documenting state peer specialist information such as whether the state sanctioned a statewide certified peer support specialist program, whether training and reimbursement is specific to substance use disorders (excludes mental health), training requirements and training organizations, Medicaid Reimbursement information and more.

Learn more here: www.copelandcenter.com/peer-specialists

In Summary

Extending the use of the certified peer support model to the field of maternal mental health addresses current barriers to care including mental health care provider shortages, stigma/shame and the need for culturally competent care, while doing so in a cost-effective manner.

The certified peer support care model can enhance the resources and quality of treatment available to both treating providers and women at risk for and suffering from maternal mental health disorders.

What Can I Do?

Legislators

- Check to see if you have a state agency that certifies or has appointed a certifying body for mental health peer support.
- Check to see if your state Medicaid agency is reimbursing, and at a rate that equates to a living wage for services provided 40 hours a week, for certified peer specialists providing mental health support
- Introduce legislation to close these gaps

Obstetricians/Behavioral Health Providers

- Consider becoming a Medicaid provider in your state if your state reimburses for certified peer mental health support, so you can employ and bill for certified peer specialists time in providing emotional support, text check-ins and care navigation

Non-Profits

- Check to see if you have a state agency that certifies or has appointed a certifying body for mental health peer support.
- Check to see if your state Medicaid agency is reimbursing, and at a rate that equates to a living wage for services provided 40 hours a week, for certified peer specialists providing mental health support
- Work with a legislator to introduce policy to close gaps
- If you offer or plan to offer maternal mental health peer support, ensure the peers you utilize have met core competencies
- Consider becoming a Medicaid provider in your state if your state reimburses for certified peer mental health support, so you can employ and bill for certified peer specialist time in providing emotional support, text check-ins and care navigation

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