

Competencies for Criminal Justice Peer Workers

New York State Certified Peer Worker Program

Background Regarding These Competencies

The effectiveness of Criminal Justice (CJ) peer workers is rooted in the fact that these workers share a common “lived experience” with individuals who are, or have been, involved with the criminal justice system. As a result, CJ peer workers have a unique capacity to provide targeted services that can inspire, empower and support health and well-being for clients who are: charged with a crime; on trial in general courtroom, drug court or family court; experiencing incarceration; returning to the community after a period of incarceration; or, on probation/parole. Peer workers provide a unique category of service delivery through the lens of “shared lived experience” which is distinct from the roles and services delivered by other members of a multi-disciplinary care or prevention team. The following is a list of competencies that comprise the full potential scope of activities that a NYS Certified Peer Worker in the Criminal Justice Track might carry out in the community or within a correctional setting. Organizations employing peer workers should consider the concept of “shared lived experience” and this list of competencies when defining specific job descriptions and recruiting CJ peer workers. It is anticipated that an individual peer worker’s job description would not encompass all of these competencies, but rather, would focus on one or a few of these key areas of work.

* To achieve certification, an individual must receive a satisfactory rating from their supervisor on all 8 competencies marked with an asterix.

General Competencies

All CJ peer workers are responsible for carrying out the specific competencies outlined below, regardless of the work setting and job description.

- Shares their personal experience in a strategic, compassionate, and responsive manner and comfortably discloses status*
- Demonstrates a commitment to personal self-management of health conditions and treatment regimens
- Addresses health literacy needs of clients to ensure client understanding of messages delivered
- Communicates using a person-centered approach such as active listening, stages of change, motivational interviewing and/or harm reduction counseling
- Upholds agency confidentiality policies and procedures
- Recognizes own vulnerabilities and emotional responses to work-related matters and identifies strategies for managing the situation, including asking for help from supervisor(s) and/or other supports
- Recognizes the limits of their knowledge and seeks assistance from supervisor, other staff, or other available supports when needed
- Seeks opportunities to increase knowledge and skills for peer support
- Employs self-care strategies to promote wellness and prevent burnout
- Demonstrates effective oral, written and non-verbal communication skills appropriate for the specific work setting

- Develops awareness of and manages own personal biases and triggers when dealing with participant, as required for their specific worksite
- Relates to clients via their shared lived experience, despite the differences that may exist between them

Understands basic information about the Criminal Justice System

CJ peer workers have a basic understanding of the criminal justice system, its components, and its role in society. CJ peer workers are sensitive to issues of stigma around criminal justice involvement. They never ask about, or share, an individual's reason for incarceration, guilt, or innocence. CJ peer workers are prepared to listen to, and react in a helpful manner, when a client shares their thoughts and feelings about their experience with the criminal justice system.

- Understands the function of a judge, prosecutor, defense counsel, probation officer, and advocate and can describe the role of each element of the criminal justice system
- Has knowledge of the different categories of laws and their implications for sentencing and an individual's criminal record
- Is familiar with different types of correctional settings and sentencing options
- Advocates for, but never gives, legal advice and works as part of a team to refer clients to a wide range of resources to address legal issues and other matters related to interacting with the criminal justice system*
- Is sensitive to issues of stigma regarding criminal justice involvement and never asks or shares information about a client's reason for incarceration, innocence or guilt
- Acknowledges systemic racism, racialized criminal justice policies and disproportionate incarceration of people of color and interacts with clients in a manner to dispel pessimism and motivate them to achieve their highest potential
- Uses lived experience to promote health equity and empower clients to live their healthiest and most productive lives possible*
- Is aware of the trauma associated with arrest, trial and incarceration and provides services in a trauma-informed manner

Community Reentry Competencies

CJ peer workers use their lived experience to assist individuals with community reentry. CJ peer workers orient individuals to the challenges they are likely to face, including: promoting continuity of medical care and social services; promoting access to social support; and, addressing tasks of daily living that they did not have to address while incarcerated. Based on the specific work setting and job description, CJ peer workers may be responsible for demonstrating some or all of the competencies outlined below.

- Use lived experience to educate newly released, or soon to be released, individuals about the challenges they are likely to face upon community reentry, including: housing, family and social support, employment, stigma, substance use, sexual health, navigating systems, and others*
- Assist with addressing tasks of daily living, including: obtaining identification; time management skills and daily routine; engaging in personal care; reconnecting with family; promoting wellness and self-care; and adapting to freedoms associated with living in the community
- Provide support to individuals with current or past substance use disorder, including:

- Reinforce access to and/or continuity of substance use disorder treatment or medication for opioid use disorder treatment in the community, as needed
- Educate about risk of opioid overdose and support a person's overdose prevention plan
- Link to harm reduction and treatment services
- Link to social and mutual support such as AA or NA meetings
- Provide support to individuals in maintaining and promoting their health, including:
 - Reinforce continuity of medical care for HIV, HCV, any chronic disease, gender affirming medical care or other health issues
 - Discuss the basics of health insurance coverage and linking the individual to appropriate health insurance navigation programs, Uninsured Care Programs/ADAP, etc.
 - Share knowledge of available health and social service, including in-person, and tele-health
 - Navigate individuals to needed health, pharmacy and social services needs
- Assist individuals in becoming acquainted with current technology, internet, use a cell-phone, including tracking minutes and data
- Use lived experience to educate individuals on strategies for interacting with the criminal justice system, community law enforcement, and avoiding arrest/ reincarceration, including:
 - Share practical strategies for building and maintaining a positive relationship with Probation and Parole
 - Review with the client any conditions of parole/release that are in place and provide support in meeting these conditions
 - Reinforce the importance of staying within any curfew and travel restrictions, meeting required planned and unplanned parole check-ins and practicing open communication with the parole officer in addressing any situations where a day pass or justifiable special accommodation may be needed
 - Advise on practices to promote safe and positive interactions with law enforcement in the community, including strategies to avoid negative interactions with police and the responsibility of reporting to Parole any new charges, infractions or significant interactions with law enforcement
 - Educate on local laws, including updated laws
 - Proactively deal with potential client positive drug tests by working with other members of the team to identify treatment options, arranging for care and communicating proactively with the parole officer
- Work as part of a team to assess client needs related to social determinants of health and work with other members of the care team to create and carry out a service delivery plan:
 1. Housing:
 - a. Work as a member of the team to support successful transition to the address designated in the discharge certificate
 - b. Establish a meeting with the client as soon as possible after release
 - c. Escort client to initial housing arrangements, as appropriate
 - d. If a change of residence is needed, provide support, escort and help orient to the situation as appropriate (e.g. living with family, SRO, shelter or other option).
 2. Nutrition:
 - a. Provide information on healthy / nutritional meals
 - b. Link individuals to appropriate food/meal services, including developing skills needed for food preparation, and grocery shopping for healthy, affordable foods
 3. Employment:

- a. Work as part of a team to link clients interested in employment to their local Career Center, ACCESS-VR and any other vocational services
- b. Inform client about local CBOs, libraries, and employment initiatives that provide services related to finding a job or job training
- c. Educate client on Fair Chance act: Help individual learn how to disclose criminal history to employers when they are required to/not required to
4. Legal:
 - a. Assist with navigating referrals to legal services to address any outstanding legal issues
 - b. Referral to legal services to explore the possibility of expunging the person's criminal record
5. Transportation
 - a. Use shared lived experience to assist the client in accessing needed public or private transportation
6. Education
 - a. Assist as needed with obtaining GED, attending college, trade school or other options for professional or personal development
7. Social and mental health support
 - a. Sharing lived experience related to building/ rebuilding relationships with family, addressing expectations, needs (CPS, adoption, other experiences)
 - b. Work with individuals to identify social supports who share similar activities and interests
 - c. Sharing lived experience with building trust and connection to community
 - d. Work to destigmatize mental health services and support access as needed

Harm Reduction Competencies

The criminalization of substance use has resulted in the incarceration of many individuals with a history of substance use and substance use disorder. Due to a change in NYS policy in 2021, incarcerated individuals may access treatment for substance use disorder including medication for opioid use while incarcerated in DOCCS facilities and county jails. This makes efforts to ensure continuity of treatment upon release very important. CJ peer workers assist individuals with linkage to the full range of harm reduction and treatment resources, including opioid overdose prevention. Based on the specific work setting and job description, CJ peer workers may be responsible for demonstrating some or all of the competencies outlined below.

- Use lived experience to promote the health and dignity of people who use drugs
- Convey the principles of harm reduction and how it applies to different areas of risk (i.e., drug use, sex work, health behavior change, etc.)
- Has a basic understanding of the various classes of drugs/drug use and how to employ harm reduction strategies that are drug-specific
- Has a basic understanding of sexual risk and associated harm reduction strategies
- Promote and support referrals to a wide range of harm reduction and health promotion resources, including: Medication for Opioid Use Disorder; Substance Use Disorder treatment; Syringe Access Programs/Expanded Syringe Access Programs (SAP/ESAP); condom availability programs; PrEP/PEP services; smoking cessation resources; sexual health promotion resources; and others as needed by the participant
- Provide education and reinforce harm reduction messaging

- Research, develop and maintain up-to-date information about community, health and other resources and services, both informal and formal
- Recognize signs of harm, crisis or distress that may interfere with medical care or treatment adherence. Takes action to alert or engage other members of the service delivery team to address the situation by using local resources, services or participant support
- Work with a multi-disciplinary team to address issues that impact a client's ability to engage in services due to drug use and/or high-risk sexual behaviors/sex work

Preventing Opioid Overdose

- Is trained as an Overdose Responder prepared to administer naloxone.
- Educate participants about how to avoid opioid overdose including: signs of an overdose; risk of fentanyl and other substances in the drug supply; changes in individual tolerance after periods of abstinence; risks of using alone; dangers of mixing drugs; availability of medication to reverse an overdose; and, support following their individualized overdose prevention plan
- Refer participants to Opioid Overdose Prevention Programs for training and/or provides this training when appropriate, if not prohibited in the discharge plan
- Explain the importance of calling 911 in cases of a suspected overdose
- Explain that the Good Samaritan Law provides protection from charges and prosecution for certain drug related charges, for the person who calls and the person who ODs
- Educate participants on the use of Fentanyl Test Strips and explains that in NYS drug testing equipment is not “drug-related paraphernalia” and it is legal to possess and use this equipment.

Gender and Sexual Health

CJ peer workers are aware of the elements of sexual health and interact in an affirming manner with people of all genders and sexual orientations. Women, people of trans experience, lesbian, gay and bi-sexual people face unique challenges interacting with the criminal justice system. Based on the specific work setting and job description, CJ peer workers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the competencies outlined below:

- Educate newly released individuals about navigating their sexual health upon return to the community, including: 1) promoting access to sexual health information, education, and care, including PrEP, PEP, condoms and other HIV/STI prevention methods; 2) establishing healthy sexual relationships in the community; 3) making an effort to prevent unintended pregnancies and STD/STIs and seek care and treatment when needed; 4) recognizing and respecting the sexual rights we all share; and 5) being able to communicate about sexual health with others including sexual partners and healthcare providers
- Is aware of the unique stigma experienced by women who have a history of incarceration and provides services in an affirming, trauma-informed manner
- Avoids stigmatizing language related to transactional sex and interacts with people who engage in transactional sex in an affirming and trauma-informed manner
- Is aware of the challenges and trauma that transgender people face in interactions with law enforcement and during incarceration, and interacts with transgender people in an affirming, trauma-informed manner, using appropriate pronouns and names

- Is aware of the challenges and trauma that lesbian, gay and bi-sexual people face in interactions with law enforcement and during incarceration and interacts with lesbian, gay and bi-sexual people in an affirming, trauma-informed manner
- Demonstrates compassion when sex workers or LGBT people report trauma, physical or sexual violence and works with the team to destigmatize and promote access to needed health, mental health and legal services

Supporting Health, Patient Navigation and Self-Management

CJ peer workers generally serve as part of a multidisciplinary team in the community or within a correctional facility to provide education, support and promote health and well-being, with a specific focus on HIV, HCV, STIs and sexual health. CJ peer workers educate individuals about the importance of testing, treatment and ongoing participation in health care services. CJ peer workers address real and perceived barriers to health care services, including medical mistrust, promoting access to health coverage, linking individuals to health services and orienting them to the health care system. CJ peer workers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the competencies outlined below:

Supporting Health:

- Provide basic information about HIV/HCV/STI prevention and sexual health, including U=U, PrEP, condom use and other harm reduction options*
- Provide basic information about the course of illness and symptoms of HIV, hepatitis C and STIs*
- Explain the importance of HIV/HCV/STI screening and diagnosis and refers participants to these services, as needed*
- Provide basic information about care, treatment and laboratory monitoring for HIV and HCV
- Support treatment adherence for HIV and treatment adherence/completion for HCV and STIs
- Support ongoing engagement and retention in care for all health conditions
- Use lived experience to assist individuals with overcoming barriers to health care services, including addressing medical mistrust, linking people to health coverage and building familiarity about what to expect during a health care visit

Patient Navigation:

CJ peer workers can play an important role in helping clients learn about and navigate the health care system, as well as the broader service delivery system. Based on his or her specific job description, CJ peer workers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the competencies outlined below:

- When engaging and linking a client to an initial health care appointment, accurately communicates verbally and in writing, the following information: the date, time, location, provider name, information about what to bring to the appoint and any other facility-specific information needed to have a successful appointment
- Accompany clients to community activities and appointments and participates in community activities with clients as assigned and approved by supervisor
- Inform new clients about available services and processes
- Share information about how to get to the facility via public transportation, car or walking

- Explore any concerns the client may have regarding personal safety while getting to, or navigating around, the health care facility

Client Self-Management:

Based on the specific work setting and job description, CJ peer workers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the competencies outlined below:

- Relate their own and/or others' life experiences (while respecting privacy) to clients to inspire hope and empowerment*
- Model positive self-management behaviors
- Work as part of the care team to help the client develop self-management goals, provide coaching and track progress meeting these goals
- Assist clients in voicing concerns or questions to members of the care team
- Educate clients about health, wellness, treatment adherence, viral suppression, and available support services
- Validate client's life experiences and feelings and celebrates client's efforts and accomplishments
- Recognize and respond to the complexities and uniqueness of each client's self-management and tailor services and support to meet the preferences and unique needs of each individual
- Recognize and responds to competing priorities and life events that may impact self-management, such as: co-morbid conditions; child care; employment; legal issues, substance use, and others
- Implement peer-run, evidence based self-management interventions as directed by the agency

Support Groups

Based on the specific work setting and job description, CJ peer workers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the specific competencies outlined below:

- Market support group to recruit clients to join the group
- Serve as facilitator or co-facilitator of a support group, along with another staff person
- Act as a liaison between peers and co-facilitator, to bridge gaps and ensure groups are meeting the needs of the participants
- Lead by example by strategically sharing personal experience/stories
- Encourage active participation and sharing of information
- Establish and enforce support group rules to ensure confidentiality and "safe space"
- Make statements that show understanding, compassion, sympathy, and concern
- Encourage clients to listen and provides supportive feedback

Supportive Services

CJ peer workers can play an important role supporting the client in accessing a wide range of social services and supports. CJ peer workers should not be expected to complete needs assessments, develop service plans or make decisions about referrals to specific psycho-social services. Rather, peer workers work as part of the care team to gather information about client needs, support an established service plan and support the client in accessing services to which they have been referred. Based on the specific work setting and job description, CJ peer workers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the competencies outlined below:

- Work as part of multi-disciplinary team to identify supportive services to meet client needs
- Work as part of a team a multi-disciplinary team to provide targeted referrals and linkages to essential services outside of agency
- Educate clients about the range of behavioral health and supportive services and works to destigmatize these services and make referrals as needed
- Assist clients with appointments for supportive services or arranges appointments for them
- Accompanies clients to supportive services appointments

Case Conferencing

CJ peer workers participate in case conferences to discuss the needs of individual clients and to report out on their work with the client. Based on the specific work setting and job description, CJ peer workers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the specific competencies outlined below:

- Work as member of multi-disciplinary team to retain clients in care by addressing barriers to the provision of service delivery and needed supportive services for client
- Provide a brief summary of their work with the client, including reporting on psychosocial issues, barriers or facilitators to care
- Convey their point of view in a respectful way when working with colleagues
- Recognize the limits of their knowledge and seeks assistance from others when needed

Facilitating involvement in continuous quality improvement (QI) efforts

CJ Peer workers engage and encourage participants to play a role in facility-level QI activities and participate in QI activities as part of their role as members of the service delivery team. Based on the specific work setting and job description, CJ peer workers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the specific competencies outlined below:

- Actively participate in efforts to improve the organization
- Engage and encourage participants to contribute to facility-level QI activities
- Participate in QI activities as part of their role as members of the service delivery team
- Represent the voices and perspectives of participants in the QI process
- Participate in agency efforts to provide services in ways that reduce stigma, prejudice and discrimination of persons who use drugs and/or engage in high-risk sexual behaviors/sex work

Documentation and Record-Keeping

CJ peer workers are expected to provide documentation of the services they deliver to participants. Based on the specific work setting and job description, CJ peer workers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the specific competencies outlined below:

- Respect confidentiality of participant records and follows all agency policies for handling participant records
- Document services provided to the participant in the participant record, in accordance with agency policies, including documenting referrals and follow-up activities
- Document time and effort as needed for billing/ reimbursement practices, in accordance with agency policies