

10 Steps to Build Your Peer Support Program



A robust peer support program is an essential component to any comprehensive behavioral health program. The 10 steps outlined below are critical components to the development of your peer support program.

1. OBTAIN NEEDED BUY-IN



Identify whose support is needed to make your program a reality. Is it your chief, your battalion chief, union leadership or CISM team? Identifying your biggest supporters and toughest critics will empower you to mobilize the support you need. Once you've identified the key stakeholders to target, make an informed case on why peer support is needed in your organization. Use peer support training resources and [behavioral health guides](#) available at www.iaff.org/behavioral-health to help make the case.

2. IDENTIFY A PEER SUPPORT TEAM LEADER



Leading a peer support team is a big job, so identifying the right person is critical to your program's success. The team leader should be passionate about peer support and behavioral health issues, reliable and trusted by others. Solid networking, organization and communication skills are also a must. Lastly, your team leader should have enough free time to dedicate to the job.

3. RECRUIT YOUR PEER SUPPORT TEAM



Once you've selected a team leader, organize members to serve on your team. Consider using a simple anonymous poll that asks members who they would confide in after a stressful day on the job or when facing a personal crisis. In recruiting your team, aim for a broad demographic makeup that reflects the age, race, gender, rank and retiree population of your department. Peers should be trustworthy, passionate about helping others, in good standing with your local and be in stable mental health. See the IAFF guide on [Selecting Your Peer Team](#) for more information, which can be found at www.iaff.org/behavioral-health/#resource-guides.

4. DEVELOP YOUR PEER SUPPORT TEAM



Identify which program model will work best for your organization. Peer teams can be based through a local union, department, state/provincial association or other entity. Each model has advantages or disadvantages that could impact how you pursue any needed funding for your program. Once you have identified a program model, you will need relevant standard operating procedures (SOPs) that identify basic functions and processes for your peer team operations. Contact behavioralhealth@iaff.org for sample peer team SOPs.

5. IDENTIFY A BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CLINICIAN TO PROVIDE OVERSIGHT



Peer support teams should not function without oversight from a trained and licensed mental health clinician. A good clinician will play a variety of critical roles in your peer support program, including ongoing supervision, education, peer screening, SOP review and help building your network of vetted treatment providers. Your clinician must understand the peer support model, be familiar with fire service culture and be accessible. See the IAFF guide to [Finding the Right Clinician](#), which can be found at www.iaff.org/behavioral-health/#resource-guides.

6. TRAIN YOUR PEER SUPPORT TEAM



Training your peer team is an ongoing process. A suggested starting point is the two-day [IAFF Peer Support Training](#), which provides introductory education on behavioral health issues in the fire service and teaches fundamental peer support skills. Your behavioral health clinician can also provide periodic education, in addition to training from other reputable behavioral health organizations. Visit www.iaff.org/behavioral-health to request the training.

7. DEVELOP A REFERRAL NETWORK



Developing a referral network is time consuming, but a critical step to connect your members to local resources. Start by checking if there are behavioral health resources already available in your department or EAP. For resources outside of the department, identify your department's insurance coverage for all levels of mental health and substance abuse treatment. Call, visit and vet resources in your community, including clinicians, psychiatrists, treatment centers, crisis hotlines, local support groups and other non-behavioral health resources. Lastly, keep an updated listed of vetted behavioral healthcare providers and resources.

8. CONDUCT REGULAR OUTREACH



Outreach ensures critical stakeholders know your peer support program exists and how to access it. Start by identifying who needs to know about your program. This list may vary program to program, but will likely include fire fighters, fire chiefs, retirees, family members, your EAP and local clinicians. Like training, outreach is ongoing. Don't wait until a traumatic event impacts your department to conduct outreach. Conducting informal station visits, distributing written materials or holding planned information sessions can help your program establish presence and credibility.

9. MAINTAIN YOUR PEER SUPPORT TEAM



Your peer support team needs regular maintenance to keep running smoothly. This might include revising your team protocols, evaluating workload distribution or simply doing a team morale check. Regularly scheduled peer team meetings are a good time to conduct peer and clinical supervision, share positive outcomes, explore challenges and exchange referral feedback. Peer team members should be encouraged to practice self-care and consider an annual wellness check with a your team's behavioral health clinician or a clinician of their choice.

10. EVALUATE YOUR IMPACT



Collecting data helps you understand how your peer support program is working and demonstrates your impact to administration and other stakeholders while preserving confidentiality. An anonymous survey of your organization could identify utilization, satisfaction and suggestions for program improvement. Quantitative data can be compared to EAP use to demonstrate program value. For those willing to their share experience, peer testimonials are a valuable way to build program buy-in and credibility.

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A PLANNING GUIDE

Building a peer support program requires systematic planning, leadership and teamwork. Use the grid below to explore critical steps.

PLANNING COMPONENT	CRITICAL QUESTIONS	NEXT STEP & TIMEFRAME
1. OBTAIN BUY-IN 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whose support is needed? • What resources can we use to help make our case? 	
2. IDENTIFY A TEAM LEAD 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are essential qualities of our peer team lead? • Who are some possible team leads in our organization? 	
3. RECRUIT YOUR TEAM 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How should we recruit and choose potential peers? • What are the criteria to serve on our peer team? 	
4. DEVELOP YOUR TEAM 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which is the best model for our peer team? • What components of peer team operations need to be covered in our SOP/OGs? 	
5. IDENTIFY A BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CLINICIAN 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can we identify a team behavioral health clinician? • What will be the basic functions of our team behavioral health clinician? 	
6. TRAIN YOUR TEAM 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have all peer team members had an introductory peer support training? • What are critical topics to pursue for continuing education and training? 	
7. DEVELOP A REFERRAL NETWORK 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What behavioral health resources are available in our department or community? • Who is responsible for maintaining a list of vetted providers and resources? 	
8. CONDUCT REGULAR OUTREACH 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who needs to know about our program, in addition to our members? • What outreach methods and activities can be used to connect with them? 	
9. MAINTAIN YOUR TEAM 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How often and where should peer support team meetings occur? • What are the key objectives/agenda for our peer team meeting? 	
10. EVALUATE YOUR IMPACT 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can we demonstrate the effectiveness of our program? • What data is currently collected that could help us? 	