



Peer support behind bars

Bridging barriers to successful reentry

BY DR. BRYAN L. KLINE



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What are peer-based services?

Peer-based services draw on those that have lived experience whether in working through the criminal justice system, recovering from addiction or grappling with their own mental health struggles to give mentorship, advocacy and support to people behind bars now living that experience. These peer professionals also are relatable role models who fill a role that traditional clinical or custodial staff can't necessarily fill, offering hope and practical advice from firsthand knowledge.

Recognizing the obstacles to reentry

Reentry is commonly known as a crucial and vulnerable time for individuals exiting correctional facilities. Returning to the community from incarceration can be a difficult process, sometimes a complicated one, for those who experience something like:

- **Housing Instability:** Given legal restrictions, financial constraints and social support, these individuals face immediate challenges finding safe, stable housing.
- **Employment Barriers:** A criminal record often severely restricts opportunities for employment, and without secure income, newly released individuals have a hard time simply living on their own.
- **Healthcare Gaps:** Receiving medical and behavioral health care becomes challenging due to loss of coverage, transportation barriers and knowledge of available community resources.
- **Social Isolation and Stigma:** The negative aspects associated with incarceration can prevent individuals from connecting with their families, friends and community, heightening loneliness and diminishing incentives to seek help.
- **Legal/Probation:** Complex conditions of parole or probation include mandatory reporting and treatment requirements.
- **Substance Use Triggers:** Returning to places where substance use is common increases risk for recurrence.

These barriers may operate concurrently to form a high-risk environment for recidivism. Filled with

insufficient assistance, many people risk falling back into the cycle of offending and re-incarceration.

Because peers “speak the same language” of lived experience, they can establish safe spaces for frank communication around fears, setbacks and goals, reducing feelings of stigma and isolation.

How peer support overcomes these barriers

Peers with lived experience know all about these same struggles not just conceptually but literally, because they have overcome them. This unique understanding enables peer specialists to offer concentrated help in the following crucial ways:

- **Mentorship:** Peer mentors can tell their own stories of overcoming housing difficulties or getting jobs once released. Their success stories inspire hope and show that such barriers are surmountable.
- **Navigational Guidance:** Peers often guide people through complicated systems to find and access things they need such as subsidized housing programs, job training agencies, medical providers and legal assistance.
- **Building Trust and Reducing Isolation:** Because peers “speak the same language” of lived experience, they can establish safe spaces for frank communication around fears, setbacks and goals, reducing feelings of stigma and isolation.
- **Supporting Accountability and Compliance:** Peers who understand probation and parole systems are able to provide clarity around conditions, help participants plan how to meet deadlines, and troubleshoot issues for adherence, all of which minimize the likelihood of any technical violations.

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- **Relapse Prevention:** With experience in recovery, peers are able to recognize triggers and assist in developing coping strategies to resist relapse. Ongoing encouragement also contributes to sustained engagement in treatment.

By offering this combination of emotional support, practical assistance and system navigation, peers fill the critical void and increase the likelihood that someone will continue to use reentry services, meet probation requirements and make a meaningful footprint in the community.

Why we need peers in corrections

Establishing trust where you need it most

In correctional settings, trust is often hard to come by. Staff struggle to connect with people who are skeptical, defensive or disengaged with programming. Peer specialists who have gained firsthand experience of incarceration connect authentically and help break open barriers to treatment for incarcerated persons to access supportive services and treatment that may otherwise be beyond reach.

Supporting recovery and reentry goals

Peer support emphasizes hope and possibility. They are also part of a team that offers tools and emotional support for rehabilitation and recovery. “There are many peers who also give guidance in coping strategies and information about community resources — providing people with the skills to have confidence and succeed after release,” she explains.

Reducing recidivism through tailored support

Correctional facilities make an effort to control the risk of reoffending by tackling the root causes of addiction and untreated mental health conditions. Peers enhance these initiatives by extending avenues of support and ensuring continuity of care both of which have been shown to reduce returns to custody.

Maximizing resources

Trained peer specialists help corrections agencies reach an extended audience. Peers are cost-effective and flexible support that supplements traditional services, promoting program improvement and reform.

Cost-effectiveness

In the United States, the average annual cost per incarcerated individual exceeds \$30,000, according to the Vera Institute of Justice. Reducing recidivism is a crucial way for jurisdictions to control their correctional outlays.

Peer programs are often considerably less expensive than traditional clinical or custodial roles and can reach individuals in a flexible space “where they are.” Peer support programs prevent costly reincarceration by increasing engagement, adherence to treatment, and reducing returns to custody. By investing in peer support, taxpayer budgets are saved and resources redirected toward targeted prevention, education and reentry support that lead to long-term success. A number of jurisdictions benefit from reduced recidivism based on peer involvement and this can be justified as a financial and ethical choice by any of these jurisdictions.

Implementation best practices

- **Extensive Training and Supervision:** All peers should be given in-depth instruction on communication methods, ethics, confidentiality, boundaries and self-care. Continual supervision reinforces their effectiveness and well-being.
- **Collaborative Integration Across Facility Operations:** Successful peer programs are fully integrated as part of a multidisciplinary team and carefully balance safety and therapeutic goals.
- **Appreciation and Empowerment of Peers’ Expertise:** Agencies should respect peer specialists as key contributors to the program involving them in design, delivery and ongoing improvement.
- **Protecting Privacy and Confidentiality:** Policies should protect privacy and confidentiality by building a trusting and open environment for honest dialogue and support.

Proven successes in corrections

There are counties and states around the country utilizing peer recovery coach models with promising results: more participants in addiction and mental health treatment; increased use of reentry services; and reduced disciplinary incidents within facilities. These favorable results suggest the transformative possibilities for peer-based services as they are purposefully embedded in correctional programming.

Correctional professionals working towards developing low-cost, compassionate and evidence-based treatment approaches should also recognize peer-based services as one of the key elements of recovery and reentry strategies. Having lived the problem they describe, peer specialists are unique in their understanding, mentorship and support of the individual's struggles to disrupt the cycle of barriers that hinder long-term change.

Peer support isn't "just another program." It is a potent way to humanize correctional care, reduce recidivism rates and convert facilities into places of hope and development. [CT](#)



Dr. Bryan L. Kline is a seasoned criminal justice expert with over 16 years of leadership experience in corrections, reentry programs, and policy reform. As Site Director of Reentry Services for an organization in Pittsburgh, PA and founder of Gray Line Solutions, he has developed innovative, evidence-based initiatives that address critical social determinants such as employment, housing, and mental health to reduce recidivism. Dr. Kline's extensive background includes managing major correctional facilities, overseeing multimillion-dollar budgets, and designing specialized training and educational programs. He is also an accomplished educator and published author focusing on rehabilitation and reintegration within the criminal justice system. For more information visit bryankline.com

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