Our Mission

The New Jersey Peer Coalition (NJPC) is our state's statewide, peer-led membership organization, dedicated to supporting people with lived experience in their recovery. NJPC exists to empower individuals by providing education, skill-building, and advocacy tools that help people understand their rights, explore personal and system-level options, and create meaningful change in their own lives and across the mental health system in New Jersey. Through empowerment-focused trainings, monthly membership meetings, and an annual statewide conference, NJPC members strengthen their ability to speak up about the issues that people in the mental health community face every day. NJPC members actively raise awareness by serving on local, state, and national advisory boards, committees, and councils—ensuring that people with lived experience have a direct voice in shaping mental health policy, services, and systems.

NJPC's monthly membership and board meetings provide a supportive space for peers to share ideas, raise concerns, and discuss issues impacting their daily lives, including legislation, media, and education. These meetings also create opportunities for direct dialogue between peers, state officials, and service providers—fostering collaboration, transparency, and meaningful system improvements grounded in lived experience.
Each year, NJPC hosts its Annual Conference, bringing together approximately 250 peers for a day of learning, connection, and empowerment. Participants build advocacy and wellness skills while sharing resources and experiences.

NJPC is driven by the belief that people with lived experience deserve respect, inclusion, and a voice in shaping the systems that affect their lives.

Join Today!

NJPC Conference Agenda

9:00 AM - 9:30 AM Registration / Light Breakfast/ Opening Remarks

9:30 AM - 10:25 AM Grand Ballroom Panel
From Voice to Power: Turning Lived Experience into Advocacy Action

10:30 AM – 11:25 AM Morning Workshops
VIP A: Medicaid, SNAP & the Power of Self Advocacy
VIP B: Bridging Connection Between Peers & Providers
VIP E: Being a Systems Advocate

11:30 AM -12:25 PM Grand Ballroom Afternoon Panel
Office of the Public Defender Mental Health Advocacy
Your Rights Under Civil Commitment, Krol, & Competency

12:30 PM -1:30 PM Lunch Grand Ballroom
Judy Banes Award/ Annual Meeting / Drawing of the Pick - A – Prize

1:35 PM - 2:30 PM Afternoon Workshops
VIP A:Tools at Your Fingertips:
Using What You Have for Independence & Success
VIP B: Understanding the 988 Crisis Continuum
& the Role of Peer Advocacy
VIP E: Voices for Wellness: A Peer-Led Hybrid Training
and Support Model for Justice System Reentry

2:35 PM – 3:00 PM Grand
Ballroom
Final Prize Drawing
Closing

Morning Panel

From Voice to Power:
Turning Lived Experience into Advocacy Action

People with lived experience are often most impacted by systems but least heard in shaping them. Grounded in real-world advocacy, this panel will help participants turn personal experience into meaningful action. Learn how to engage in spaces where decisions are made such as Community Advisory Boards (CABs), Mental Health Boards, PAIMI Councils, town halls, and public hearings, and how to prepare and deliver clear, authentic testimony without losing your voice.

Learn how to navigate power dynamics, respond to challenging questions, and stay grounded while advocating for change. A brief interactive exercise will guide attendees in identifying an issue they care about, shaping key messages, and practicing a short testimony they can use in real settings.
This session is led by experienced leaders in advocacy and systems change.

Heather Simms, Deputy Director of Advocacy & Peer Services at Collaborative Support Programs of NJ, brings over 20 years of lived and professional experience. She leads statewide advocacy efforts and advances peer-led, recovery-oriented approaches.

Michael Callahan, Chief Operating Officer of Bridges Outreach, Inc.,
is a licensed clinical social worker and former
Director of the NJ Office of Homelessness Prevention.
His work focuses on housing access,
street outreach, and advancing
dignity-centered,
person-led systems
of care.

Morning Workshops

VIP A:
Medicaid, SNAP & the Power of Self Advocacy

Lee Ginsburg and Abigail Lewis discuss the upcoming changes to Medicaid (NJ FamilyCare) and SNAP which expected to create new challenges for individuals and families across New Jersey. They will provide a clear, plain-language overview of what's changing and what participants can do right now to protect access to healthcare, food, and essential supports. Attendees will learn how to stay on top of eligibility requirements, notices, and deadlines, and how to take action early to prevent disruptions in benefits.

Participants will learn about their rights, how to file appeals, and what steps to take if benefits are reduced, denied, or terminated. The workshop focuses on the importance of systems-level advocacy, showing how lived experience can be used to influence policy and improve access for others.

This session draws on decades of combined experience in advocacy. Lee Ginsburg sits on the PAIMI cousel and brings over 30 years of experience representing low-income and disabled individuals in healthcare access, housing, and public benefits cases, including Medicaid appeals and service reductions. Abigail Lewis advances equitable policy and strengthens advocacy efforts for individuals navigating behavioral health system.

Leave this workshop with increased confidence,
actionable strategies, and the knowledge
to protect benefits while advocating
for meaningful change
the community.

Morning Workshops

VIP B:

Bridging Connection Between Peers & Providers

Janet Berkowitz and Lynne Vicari-Blecher, present this fun and profound workshop that aims to introduce a relationship-centered approach to strengthening communication and trust between peers and providers. With over 20 years of experience in mental health advocacy and recovery services, Lynne brings a strong systems and peer perspective, while Janet contributes over 35 years of experience as a Certified Peer Specialist, WRAP facilitator, and creative arts practitioner. Together, they present The Bridge Model, a trauma-informed framework designed to rebalance power dynamics and foster mutual understanding.

The workshop focuses on helping both peers (which we call challengers) and providers move beyond traditional roles and toward authentic, collaborative relationships that support recovery. Through guided activities, role-play, and reflective exercises, participants will explore communication barriers, practice empathetic listening, and learn how to identify the difference between facts, judgments, and feelings. The session emphasizes core values such as safety, trust, curiosity, and mutuality, all of which are essential to creating environments where individuals feel safe to ask for help.

Nothing about us without us.

Morning Workshops

VIP E:
Being a Systems Advocate

Presented by Jay Yudof, a Certified Psychiatric Rehabilitation Practitioner and Recovery Programs Director at NAMI New Jersey, this engaging workshop introduces participants to the role of systems advocacy in advancing mental health rights and improving community outcomes. With over two decades of experience in peer support, training, and public policy, Jay brings both professional expertise and lived experience to this session.

This workshop explores how individuals—regardless of experience level—can play a meaningful role in shaping mental health systems, including those related to housing, criminal justice, and Medicaid. Learn how advocacy connects to the broader peer movement and civil rights efforts, while also gaining insight into the real challenges that often prevent people from stepping into advocacy roles.

Through discussion and practical examples, the session will introduce foundational advocacy skills such as understanding systems, communicating effectively, and engaging with decision-makers. Jay will also share a structured, approachable model for building advocacy skills through incremental learning and peer support.

**Designed as a welcoming and non-overwhelming introduction,
this workshop empowers participants to begin or continue
their advocacy journey, recognizing that
every voice has a place
in creating meaningful
systems change.**

Afternoon Panel

Your Rights Under Civil Commitment, Krol, & Competency

This informative panel, presented by experienced attorneys from the Office of the Public Defender's Division of Mental Health, will provide a clear and accessible overview of individuals' legal rights within civil commitment, Krol (Not Guilty by Reason of Insanity), and competency proceedings. These processes can be complex and intimidating, and this session is designed to break them down in a way that is understandable, practical, and empowering.

Together, the panelists will explain what happens during each type of legal proceeding, what rights individuals have, and how to advocate for yourself or others throughout the process. Participants will gain a stronger understanding of these legal processes, greater confidence in navigating them, and practical knowledge about what questions to ask, who to turn to for help, and how to protect their rights during these critical and often overwhelming experiences.

Cynthia Seda-Schreiber, Deputy in the Division of Mental Health Central Region, brings nearly 30 years of legal experience representing individuals in both criminal and mental health matters, including thousands facing civil commitment. She is joined by Briana McKenna, a staff attorney with the Division of Mental Health, who has represented hundreds of individuals in civil commitment & Krol cases, and Frank McCarthy, Assistant Deputy Public Defender for the Ocean Criminal Trial Region, who has 17 years of experience handling competency & Krol matters and helping clients navigate the intersection of the criminal justice and mental health systems.

Lunch

Judy Banes Courage Award

Judy Banes was full of life, humor, and truth. She used laughter to heal, and encouraged everyone to be their authentic selves. A natural leader and mentor, she was honest, direct, and never backed down from what was right. In her advocacy, Judy refused to accept "no," challenged the status quo, and moved mountains for those in need.

This inaugural award was established in honor of Judy Banes, whose recent passing has only deepened our commitment to honor her extraordinary legacy. The Judy Banes Courage Award honors advocate who embody her fearless determination, speaks the truth even when it's difficult, and who creates meaningful change no matter the odds.

Annual Meeting

Led by Chairperson Elena Kravitz, this session marks the reestablishment of NJPC's annual meeting, traditionally held during the conference. She will look to identify key priorities, and gathering input on the issues that matter most to the community.

Attendees are encouraged to share ideas, ask questions, and contribute to a proposed priorities to guide the board's work moving forward.

Ideas can also be submitted after the meeting to chairperson@njpeercoalition.org.

Afternoon Workshops

Vip A:
Tools at Your Fingertips:
Using What You Have for Independence & Success

With so many apps and tools available today, it can be overwhelming to know what works best for individuals with disabilities. Mike Marrotta and Jessi Lax bring this engaging workshop to the NJPC conference. They encourage participants to take a practical approach- focusing on the most powerful assistive technology many already have: their smartphone.

Bring your devices as we explore built-in accessibility features that support reading, writing, and executive functioning without the need to purchase additional apps. Through guided, hands-on learning, participants will explore how to activate and use built-in accessibility settings, compare features across platforms, and apply simple strategies to promote independence, success in everyday life.

Led by Mike Marotta, Director of the Richard West Assistive Technology Advocacy Center and a RESNA Certified Assistive Technology Professional, a national and international expert in assistive and inclusive technology, and Jessi Lax, an Assistive Technology Advocate with Disability Rights New Jersey, who brings over 12 years of experience supporting individuals with disabilities bring a dynamic, real-world perspective that blends technical knowledge with practical application and empowerment.

Participants will leave with tools they can immediately
use to customize their devices,
support their needs,
and strengthen
independence in
daily life.

Afternoon Workshops

VIP B:

Understanding the 988 Crisis Continuum and the Role of Peer Advocacy

For many people with lived experience, crisis response has too often meant long waits in emergency rooms, repeated hospitalizations, or traumatic interactions with law enforcement. New Jersey is working to change that through the 988 Crisis Continuum- an approach designed to ensure people in need receive a mental health response, with someone to call, someone to respond, and a safe place to go.

Matthew Camarda, Advocacy & Public Policy Director at the NAMI New Jersey, provides an overview of how the 988 system works, including call, text, and chat supports, as well as emerging community-based crisis services aimed at diverting individuals from hospitals and jails. Participants will also explore the current challenges facing implementation, including gaps in awareness, funding, and policy support.

Matt works to advance policies that expand access to quality mental health care and reduce stigma, informed by his experience as a family member and advocate. With a background in government and public policy, he offers insight into how systems are shaped and how they can be changed.

**Gain a deeper understanding of the services of NJ's 988 Crisis Continuum,
the policies needed to support its success, and the critical role
of peer advocacy in strengthening these systems.
Attendees will leave with the knowledge and
tools to help build a more responsive,
community-based crisis system
grounded in dignity,
access & lived experience.**

Afternoon Workshops

VIP E:

Voices for Wellness: A Peer-Led Hybrid Training and Support Model for Justice System Reentry

Presented by Juliana Lindner, Manager of Hunterdon County's Community Wellness Center and creator of Voices for Wellness, this session draws directly from her work facilitating peer-based programming within a women's correctional facility.

Voices for Wellness is a hybrid training and support model designed to move beyond traditional service approaches. Rather than focusing solely on external interventions, this model relies on inner resourcing, identity repair, and the power of shared experience. Through guided peer dialogue, participants are supported in rebuilding their sense of self, strengthening emotional awareness, and developing healthier relationships—both within the group and beyond.

During this session, attendees will explore the structure and facilitation of the Voices for Wellness model, including key lessons learned from implementing it in a correctional setting. Participants will gain practical tools and strategies to create safe, peer-led environments that foster trust, encourage self-reflection, and support long-term stability.

Juliana brings a person-centered approach to this work, grounded in lived experience and a commitment to creating spaces where individuals feel seen, heard, and valued. Her work reflects a belief that meaningful change happens through connection, accountability, & the opportunity to rediscover one's voice.