



Policy Brief

Forensic Peer Specialists: An Emerging Workforce

Introduction

The delivery of effective and appropriate services to individuals with psychiatric disabilities who have been involved with the criminal justice system continues to pose significant challenges to both the mental health and criminal justice systems. Programmatic initiatives have focused on either early diversion from the criminal justice system or reducing rates of recidivism. Jail diversion efforts, for instance, have used mental health courts and drug courts to reduce or slow the entry of people with behavioral health issues into jails and prisons,^{1,2} and there is a renewed emphasis on training local police officers to better manage their interactions with individuals with troubling behaviors.³ On the other hand, a new generation of reentry programming — and dollars — has sought to meet the complex needs of those released to the community with little planning, preparation, or effective community programming.⁴

To meet the needs of either jail diversion or re-entry programming initiatives, a number of state and local authorities have supported the development of a new 'forensic peer specialist' workforce. This workforce is comprised of individuals with a history of mental illness and/or incarceration, who have achieved a reasonable degree of stability in their own lives and are now employed by local government and nonprofit agencies to provide individualized support to others with psychiatric disabilities and criminal justice involvements. Forensic peer specialists (FPSs) are now working one-on-one with referrals from mental health and drug courts to provide the otherwise unavailable ongoing support consumers may need to avoid incarceration in the future. A few FPSs work with individuals inside jails and prisons to develop reentry plans that ensure a smooth transition to community life. Most FPSs, however, work within community-based reentry programs to provide both personal encouragement and practical assistance in the months following release.

The FPS field is still quite new, with job qualifications and job responsibilities variously defined from site to site, funding cobbled together from varied sources, and evaluation research mostly an afterthought. Currently driven by ideological and financial imperatives, the FPS workforce is likely to expand in the future. This Policy Brief seeks to define what we know at present about this new workforce and to establish a research agenda for the future.

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About the Policy Brief

The policy brief series is produced monthly and highlights a policy issue under study at the Center. Policy topics include reentry, diversion, sentencing, recidivism, employment, treatment, and recovery. For more information, see the News page on the Center's website.