MENTAL HEALTH

Leading Practices for State Programs to Certify Peer Support Specialists

According to officials from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), shortages in the behavioral health workforce are a key reason that individuals with mental illnesses do not receive needed treatment. In recent years, there has been an increased focus on using peer support specialists—individuals who use their own experience recovering from mental illness to support others—to help address these shortages. Program officials GAO interviewed in selected states generally cited six leading practices for certifying that peer support specialists have a basic set of competencies and have demonstrated the ability to support others.

Six Leading Practices for Programs that Certify Peer Support Specialists Identified by Program Officials from Selected States

PRACTICE 1: Systematic screening of applicants
The program should have a systematic and objective screening process to assess the applicant’s understanding of recovery and the peer role.

PRACTICE 2: Conducting core training in-person
The program should offer—or ensure approved training vendors offer—in-person core training to foster relationship building and allow peers to develop and practice their interpersonal skills.

PRACTICE 3: Incorporating physical health and wellness into training or continuing education
The program should ensure that peer support specialists are trained during core training or continuing education to help others manage their physical health in addition to their mental health.

PRACTICE 4: Preparing organizations to effectively use peers
The program should have efforts in place to educate staff at provider organizations about the peer support role and should help ensure that supervisors are prepared to supervise peers.

PRACTICE 5: Continuing education requirements specific to peer support
The program should ensure that peer support specialists take continuing education that is specific to the peer support role.

PRACTICE 6: Engaging peers in the leadership and development of certification programs
The program should ensure that peer support specialists who have been certified and are working in the field are involved throughout the certification process, including helping screen applicants, providing training, or developing curricula.

Source: GAO analysis of information from interviews with six selected states. | GAO-19-41