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PEER SUPPORT IS CHANGING LIVES
Positive support from peers is important for all of us. For those struggling with mental health issues, substance use disorders, or other major life challenges, it can be virtually life saving. At Pittsburgh Mercy, we're witnessing the incredible power of peer support—for both the giver and the recipient.

What's a peer support specialist?
Peer support specialists are people who have been through situations similar to those they support and have been successful in recovery, giving them firsthand knowledge of the healing process. Their role does not substitute or replace clinical treatment, but rather provides a unique and often invaluable layer of support that complements other recovery strategies. Peer support specialists can reduce stigma, improve quality of life, and minimize the need for certain health services in recovery. Research shows this type of support results in fewer ER and hospital visits and lower treatment readmission rates.

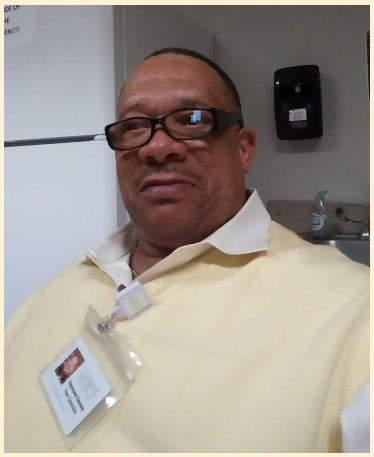
What training do they receive?
There are several levels of training in peer support. A great first step is Pittsburgh Mercy's Peer Support Worker Training Program, which had 103 participants in 2022. During the three-month program, participants learn about various mental health diagnoses and how to provide positive support, and receive training in de-escalation techniques and motivational interviewing. The Peer Support Worker Training Program is free for participants and meets once a week for three months. Upon passing the program exam, graduates can apply for a paid internship in peer support at Pittsburgh Mercy and possibly a future staff position. "Our program prepares them well for a number of potential career opportunities," said program director **Darryl Johnson**. "Some choose to complete additional training to become a Certified Peer Specialist." Certification requirements vary by state but such programs generally offer more in-depth training on competencies and application of skills. Peer support paraprofessionals are very important in bringing the "client voice" to the work that we do. They advocate for persons served and support them to advocate for themselves. Our training program provides all the skills necessary to work with persons served and on behalf of them. The internship provides them an opportunity to transfer what they learned in class to real-life situations while still being supported. In turn, they get paid work experience necessary to pursue a certification in peer support.

Driving Positive Outcomes
At Pittsburgh Mercy, we utilize both peer support specialists and Certified Peer Specialists in many of our treatment programs. Two examples:

- In our ***Social Rehabilitation Program***, they help individuals develop skills around stress

management, nutrition, exercise, and healthy relationships. In addition, peer support improves the ability to navigate social situations, a skill that's often lost due to trauma or mental illness.

- In our ***Central Recovery Center (CRC)***—a 12-person program that serves as an alternative to jail for people experiencing a mental health crisis—peer support works in tandem with clinical services (a behavioral health evaluation and psychiatric assessment) to address individual needs and promote recovery.



"I'M HERE TO HELP"

Raymond Daniels is a Certified Peer Specialist at Pittsburgh Mercy's Crisis Recovery Center (CRC). Mr. Daniels works directly with the CRC's individual clients who have been referred by trained Crisis Intervention Team municipal police officers, Allegheny County Justice Related Services, and the Allegheny County Jail. During their typical three-to-five-day stay, he takes immense pride in making sure each person has what they need to begin their day, including breakfast, medications if needed, showers, and help with transportation.

In addition, he makes referrals, leads group discussions, and works one-on-one to support each person's journey toward wellness.

Working in peer support has helped him live the life he identified in his own recovery maintenance plan, says Mr. Daniels. "It's one thing for a clinician to say 'recovery is possible,' but it's very different when a person with lived experiences not only says that but *demonstrates* it each day. This role has given me a sense of responsibility and a purpose, and I love that I get to do good every day. Whatever it is, I'm here to help."

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