

# FAQS: PEER ADVOCACY

## NEW YORK'S PEER RECOVERY AND REENTRY ACT (S1806/A4159) NATHALIA FERNANDEZ/CHANTEL JACKSON

### **Are there safety concerns in having formerly incarcerated individuals come back into jail/prison as peer support advocates?**

No, on the contrary, peer advocates enhance safety by fostering trust in correctional settings. The lived experiences shared by peers and incarcerated individuals enable them to build constructive relationships, de-escalate conflicts, and contribute to a more rehabilitative environment at large. A study in the *International Journal of Prison Health* reported that facilities implementing peer support programs experienced fewer behavioral incidents and improved program engagement when trauma-informed practices delivered by peers were incorporated.<sup>1</sup>

Further, like all other service providers, peers must go through training and screening to get clearance to work in correctional facilities. Peers also undergo rigorous training in ethics, professional boundaries, and conflict resolution, ensuring safe and effective collaboration within facilities.

### **How does peer support improve substance use disorder (SUD) treatment in jails/prisons?**

Research reveals that peer-led programs improve SUD treatment engagement rates by 40% compared to traditional models.<sup>2</sup> Peer support complements specific interventions, such as medication-assisted treatment (MAT), by providing incarcerated individuals a holistic and safe space to address emotional and social challenges with trained individuals familiar with their unique experience, thus helping ensure adherence to treatment. The benefits of peer-led recovery in correctional settings continue when individuals who have engaged in peer-led programs reenter: research demonstrates that peer services enhance continuity of care during reentry, reducing overdose risks and improving reentry outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ndindeng, AN. "Mental Health and Well-being in Prisons and Places of Detention: A Review of Interventions." *International Journal of Prison Health* 20, no. S1 (2024): S90–S92.

<sup>2</sup> Walton, H., C. Sherlaw-Johnson, E. Massou, and PL Ng. "Peer Support for Health, Social Care, and Educational Needs in Adult Prisons: A Systematic Scoping Review." *Public Health* 203 (2024): 49–56.

<sup>3</sup> Blanchet, E., et al. "Expected to Happen: Perspectives on Post-release Overdose from Recently Incarcerated People with Opioid Use Disorder." *Harm Reduction Journal* 21, no. 3 (2024): 8–9.

## Why should correctional facilities hire peers with lived experience as advocates?

Peer advocates' lived experience provides them the unique ability to directly connect with incarcerated individuals, enhancing individuals' confidence in programs, motivating participation and recovery, and ultimately strengthening treatment and reentry outcomes.

### Key benefits include:

- **Increased engagement:** Peer-led programs improve participation rates by up to 40%.<sup>4</sup>
- **Safer environments:** Peer advocates help de-escalate conflicts and promote mutual respect, leading to better facility dynamics at large.<sup>5</sup>
- **Improved reentry outcomes:** Facilities employing peers report a 25% reduction in returns to incarceration within the first year of release.<sup>6</sup>

By eliminating policies that prevent individuals with past justice involvement from entering correctional facilities, S1806/A4159 can provide a pathway for advocates to engage in evidence-based peer work with incarcerated individuals.

## How does S1806/A4159 address workforce shortages in corrections and reentry programs?

Recent reporting from the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision reveals severe staff shortages, particularly in programming. Numerous studies have advocated for the expansion of peer programming in corrections, noting that peer support advocates play a vital role in mitigating these gaps.<sup>7</sup> S1806/A4159 addresses these critical workforce shortages by creating pathways for peer advocates to provide programming both inside correctional facilities and in community-based reentry programs. Peer advocates can fill gaps in recovery support, counseling, and reentry planning with culturally competent care that engages individuals in ways traditional staff may struggle to achieve.

Further, peer-led programs are cost-effective, proven to improve program outcomes, and can help ensure correctional facilities can meet growing demands for recovery and reentry services.

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<sup>4</sup> Levi, M., et al. "Enhancing Recovery in Correctional Settings through Peer-led Programs." *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment* 89, no. 2 (2024): 3–4.

<sup>5</sup> Ndindeng, AN. "Mental Health and Well-being in Prisons and Places of Detention: A Review of Interventions." *International Journal of Prison Health* 20, no. S1 (2024): S90–S92.

<sup>6</sup> National Institute of Justice. "Reducing Recidivism through Peer-led Reentry Programs." 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Buche, J., M. Gaiser, and D. Rittman. "Characteristics of the Behavioral Health Workforce in Correctional Facilities." *Behavioral Health Workforce Report*, 2018, 12.

## How does peer support fit into broader treatment and reentry plans?

Peer support is a cornerstone of comprehensive treatment plans and reentry strategies, bridging gaps between incarceration and community reintegration by providing individuals guidance, motivation, and continuity of care.

### How it works:

- **Connecting individuals to resources:** Peer advocates can aid individuals in seeking housing, employment, and treatment prior to release to ensure their stability and success in the community.
- **Reducing barriers:** Peers' insights and lived experiences can help build trust with program participants and better ensure programming reflects what individuals actually need as they navigate reentry challenges.
- **Improving retention:** Programs that employ peers report stronger treatment engagement, higher rates of recovery, and fewer rearrests, all of which contribute to more stable community reintegration.<sup>8</sup>

By being able to identify, assess, and address emotional and practical barriers to reintegration, peer support advocates can enhance health and criminal legal outcomes for incarcerated individuals and the communities we all share.

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<sup>8</sup> National Institute of Justice. 2018. *The Role of Peer Support in Reducing Recidivism*. Bureau of Justice Assistance. *Comprehensive Strategies for Improving Retention through Peer Support*. 2021.