

# How Can a Peer Specialist Support My Recovery From Problematic Substance Use?

**For People Seeking or In Recovery**



## **Acknowledgments**

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## **Originating Office**

Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 5600 Fishers Lane, Rockville, MD 20857.

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This document is used as a supplement to SAMHSA TIP 64, *Incorporating Peer Support Into Substance Use Disorder Treatment Services*.

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# Do you want to be—or stay—in recovery from problematic alcohol or drug use?

If your answer is yes, working with someone who has “been there and done that” can be a big help on your recovery journey. A peer specialist can be that someone.

## Who Are Peer Specialists?

**Peer specialists in the substance use treatment field have lived experience of recovery from problematic substance use\* and special training** to work with people seeking or in recovery. Many peer specialists are certified by state or national organizations.

Peer specialists come from all walks of life and educational backgrounds, and they work or volunteer in many different settings. A peer specialist can:

- **Give you hope**—because they are living proof that recovery from problematic substance use is possible.
- **Make you feel understood**—because they have been where you are.
- **Help you feel informed and empowered**—because they can support you in developing your own recovery plan and link you to resources.

**Recovery is a “process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live self-directed lives, and strive to reach their full potential.”<sup>1</sup>**

**See the other text boxes in this document for more information on recovery.**



Whereas a 12-Step<sup>2</sup> sponsor uses their lived experience to guide you through the teaching of a particular 12-Step fellowship and a clinical counselor addresses your substance use, a peer specialist uses their lived experience and training to support you in:

- Exploring the many pathways to recovery.
- Making your way through treatment.
- Identifying and building on your strengths and **resilience** (your ability to bounce back).
- Taking a holistic look at your life and identifying goals you want to focus on.

\* Problematic substance use is the use of any substance in a manner, situation, amount, or frequency that causes harm to the person using the substance or to those around them. In the case of prescription medications, problematic use is any use other than as prescribed or directed by a healthcare professional. For some substances (like heroin or cocaine) or individuals (like those who engage in injection drug use), any use is problematic use. Problematic substance use includes use that is significant enough to be diagnosed as a substance use disorder.



**A peer specialist also supports you in obtaining other resources that you may need to improve your health and well-being,** such as a job and job search skills, housing, health care, and education.

Many people work with a peer specialist, a sponsor, and a clinical counselor over the course of their recovery journey.

## How Can Peer Support Services Benefit Me?

Research shows that **peer support services help people with problematic substance use enter and stay in recovery and enjoy its benefits.**

Peer support services may help you:<sup>3,4,5</sup>

- Improve your quality of life.
- Have a better experience if you get substance use treatment.
- Complete substance use treatment.
- Avoid or reduce substance use.
- Improve your relationships with family members, friends, and others in your life, like your medical providers.
- Experience reduced symptoms of anxiety or depression.
- Increase your recovery capital.



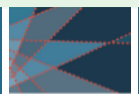
Peer specialists may have job titles like “peer mentor,” “recovery support navigator,” “recovery coach,” “certified peer specialist,” and “recovery support specialist.” If you’re not sure whether someone is a peer specialist, ask.

### What Is Recovery Capital?<sup>6,7,8</sup>

“Recovery capital” means the resources inside and outside yourself that can help you recover from problematic substance use. A peer specialist works with you on building the resources you have and creating even more.





Resources inside yourself include your skills, abilities, coping strategies, grit, and strengths. A strength can be a trait like friendliness, or something you enjoy doing, like following a sports team. Or it can be a goal, like becoming a better parent.

Resources outside yourself include supportive family members or friends, recovery support group members, or a 12-Step sponsor or other mutual-help program mentor. These resources also include a religious or spiritual community, cultural support, a safe place to live, access to health care, or a job that pays a living wage.



# What Are Peer Support Services?

A peer specialist listens to you without judgment and supports you in carrying out your own personal recovery plan built on your goals, interests, and abilities. The peer specialist does this by providing peer support services based on your choices. These services offer four types of support.<sup>9</sup>

<p><b>Emotional Support</b></p> 	<p>A peer specialist listens to you and cares about you as a person. They encourage you and help you learn to cope with negative feelings like boredom or loneliness. Ways they may do this include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coaching you on how to build self-confidence.</li> <li>• Checking in with you to see how you're doing as you work on your recovery.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Informational Support</b></p> 	<p>A peer specialist shares knowledge about recovery and the life skills that support it. They also link you to other services and resources. Ways they may do this include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing information on the physical and mental effects of problematic substance use.</li> <li>• Offering group classes on topics like budgeting and stress reduction.</li> <li>• Putting you in touch with a food or clothing bank, if needed.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Instrumental Support</b> (practical help)</p> 	<p>A peer specialist offers practical help with your recovery goals and tasks. Ways they may do this include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working with you on writing or updating your résumé.</li> <li>• Working with you on filling out an application for housing assistance.</li> <li>• Going with you to a medical appointment.</li> <li>• Helping you get government identification.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Affiliational Support</b> (support with making social connections)</p> 	<p>A peer specialist connects you with other people in recovery to help you make new friends and get involved in substance-free activities. Ways they may do this include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hosting a picnic where you can get to know other people in recovery.</li> <li>• Encouraging you to join a mutual-help program like Alcoholics Anonymous® or SMART Recovery®.</li> <li>• Arranging a movie night at a local theater.</li> <li>• Leading a group hike.</li> </ul>

As you can see, peer specialists provide support in many ways and at various locations. They may meet with you in public places like coffee shops or libraries, at recovery social events, or at your home. They may also provide some support services by phone or text, or online.



HEALTH



HOME



PURPOSE



COMMUNITY

Recovery means working toward and achieving a way of living that will make you healthier and happier. This way of living has four main parts:

- **Health:** Addressing your problematic substance use and making informed, healthy choices that support your physical and emotional well-being
- **Home:** Having a stable and safe place to live
- **Purpose:** Engaging in meaningful daily activities, such as a job, school volunteerism, family caretaking, or creative endeavors, and having the independence, income, and resources to participate in society
- **Community:** Having relationships and social networks that give you support, friendship, love, and hope

As you read this guide, think about:

- What recovery would mean for you.
- How you'd like a peer specialist to support you in recovering from problematic substance use.
- What you'd want a peer specialist to know about you.

You can write down your thoughts on forms in the appendix at the end of this guide.

## Peer Specialist Roles

Your peer specialist may fill some or all of these roles when working with you:<sup>10,11</sup>

- A **role model** for recovery and wellness
- A **connector** who puts you in touch with other people in recovery to build your support network
- A **resource navigator** who can link you to available services in the following areas:
  - Housing
  - Transportation
  - Child care
  - Health care
  - Employment
  - Education
  - Social services
  - Legal assistance
- A **coach** who practices new behaviors and ways of thinking with you
- A **sounding board** who gives you honest feedback
- An **advocate** who stands up for you and shows you how to stand up for yourself
- A **cheerleader** who celebrates your recovery accomplishments with you



# Peer Specialist Values

**Core values guide a peer specialist's work with you.** A peer specialist strives to be:<sup>12,13</sup>

- **Hopeful**—inspiring hope in you that recovery is possible.
- **Authentic**—being real with you about the recovery experience and the peer specialist role.
- **Honest**—communicating honestly and directly with you, while being caring and compassionate.
- **Culturally responsive**—welcoming diversity and encouraging you to draw on your cultural background to support your recovery.
- **Respectful**—treating you with dignity.
- **Open-minded**—accepting you, not judging you.
- **Tolerant**—recognizing that there are many pathways to recovery.
- **Cooperative**—exchanging knowledge and support with you in a two-way relationship.
- **Clear**—explaining clearly what their role does and doesn't involve.



- **Person-driven**—seeing you as a person, not as a problem; encouraging you to explore your recovery options; and respecting your decisions.
- **Strengths-focused**—focusing on what's strong in you (like your abilities, good qualities, and goals).
- **Holistic**—knowing and showing that recovery means wellness and personal growth, not just the absence of problematic substance use.

The process of recovery is personal and can occur through many different pathways. These pathways may involve clinical treatment; medication; support from family, other people in recovery, or a faith community; or any combination of these and other approaches. Some individuals think of recovery as abstinence and the disappearance of symptoms, whereas others may focus on controlling or reducing substance use.

A peer specialist can support your recovery journey no matter what path you choose. For more information on recovery, see <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/recovery>. For detailed information on peer specialists and peer support services, see <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/tip-64-incorporating-peer-support-substance-use-disorder-treatment-services/pep23-02-01-001>.



# What Types of Places Offer Peer Support Services?

Many different places now offer peer support services for people considering or in recovery from problematic substance use. The types of settings continue to grow, so the following list is not complete (the appendix contains an illustration and short descriptions of some places that may offer peer support services):

- Recovery support settings
- Substance use treatment settings
- Mental health service settings
- Social service agencies
- Harm reduction service programs<sup>14</sup>
- Criminal justice system settings

If you need help finding peer support services, try the following suggestions to identify organizations in your area that may have them. Ask the places you contact whether they provide peer support services. If they do, ask who can receive services and how to obtain them if you're eligible.

- Check the Faces & Voices of Recovery's Association of Recovery Community Organizations member listing at <https://facesandvoicesofrecovery.org/arco/arco-members-on-the-map>.
- Look online to see whether your state has an association of recovery community organizations (RCOs) or recovery community centers (RCCs). These associations (or similar organizations) may provide listings of local RCOs and RCCs. Examples of states that do are Idaho (<https://healthandwelfare.idaho.gov/services-programs/behavioral-health/statewide-recovery-community-centers>) and New York (<https://for-ny.org/recovery-community-outreach-centers/>). The terms "RCO" and "RCC" are often used interchangeably. The boxes in this section show the main differences and similarities between these types of organizations.

## What Are Recovery Community Organizations?<sup>15</sup>

RCOs are nonprofits that help people with problematic substance use achieve long-term recovery. RCOs do so through activities like:

- Engaging in advocacy, training, and public education on recovery.
- Providing peer support services onsite and at other organizations. (RCOs helped pioneer these services.)
- Running recovery-focused institutions like RCCs.

RCOs are led mainly by people in recovery.<sup>16</sup> Not all RCOs have a physical location, and some operate at the regional or state level.



## What Are Recovery Community Centers?

RCCs are local hubs of community recovery support led largely by people in recovery themselves. RCCs typically provide peer support services to their members and focus on offering:<sup>17,18</sup>

- Substance-free social and recreational activities.
- Recovery support meetings and recovery coaching.
- Linkage to employment and educational opportunities, job training, and other resources.

Other services may include self-care activities, legal assistance, and family education or support groups. Many RCCs also provide meeting space for mutual-help organizations.<sup>19</sup>


- Do an Internet search on the name of your community and the terms “recovery community organization” and “recovery community center.”
- Call the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s (SAMHSA) National Helpline at 1-800-662-HELP (4357) (<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>) for free, confidential, 24/7/365 referrals in English or Spanish to substance use treatment facilities, support groups, and community-based organizations.
- Check SAMHSA’s confidential, anonymous website <https://findtreatment.gov/> for substance use treatment facilities to contact. To learn about different types of treatment, see <https://findtreatment.gov/what-to-expect/treatment>.
- If you qualify for Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) treatment programs, check the VA substance use disorder program map at <https://va.gov/directory/guide/SUD.asp>.



- Also, if you have a case manager, clergy person, counselor, primary care provider, parole or probation officer, or social worker, ask them whether they know of organizations providing peer support services.
- If you have private health insurance, see whether your benefits include in-person or telehealth peer support services.

The illustration that follows shows how peer support services offered in different places can benefit people with different situations and pathways to recovery.

# Three Recovery Pathways

This illustration shows how peer specialists help three people with different situations and recovery paths. "Lara," age 37, went to jail for possessing methamphetamine, which she began using after moving in with her boyfriend. She had tried outpatient treatment before her arrest but returned to use. "Bob" is 65 and retired. He began drinking more often after his wife died a year ago. "Hal," 23, uses opioid medication that he gets from a relative who has a prescription. Peer specialists (each shown as a ) support Lara's, Bob's, and Hal's progress in recovery in multiple ways.



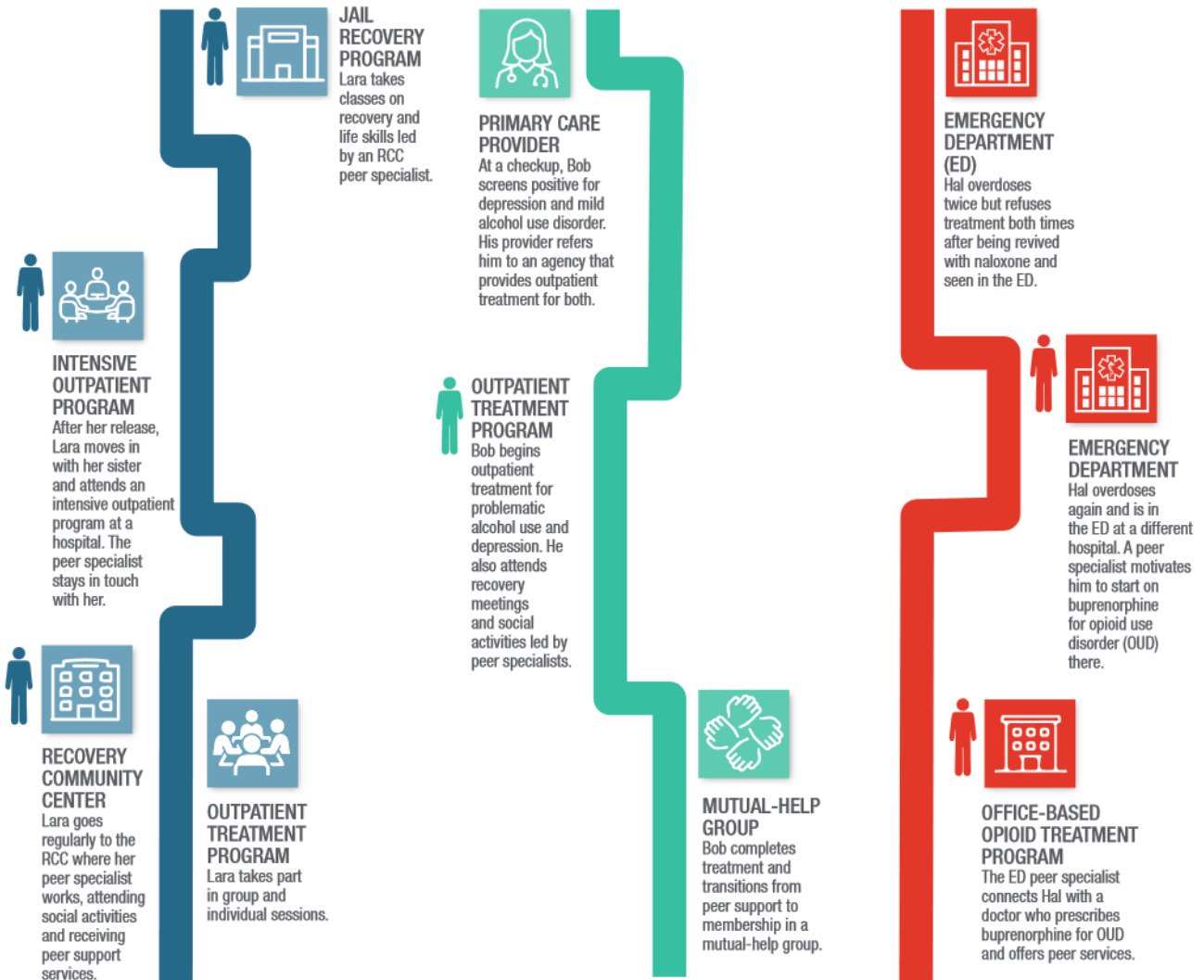
**LARA**  
**METHAMPHETAMINE**



**BOB**  
**ALCOHOL**



**HAL**  
**PRESCRIPTION OPIOIDS**



Source: Adapted from material in the public domain.<sup>20</sup>

# What Should I Expect When Working With a Peer Specialist?

**When you work with a peer specialist, you are “in the driver’s seat.”** You choose your recovery pathway and decide which of the available services and recovery activities are right for you.<sup>21</sup>

**You may feel more comfortable talking about some of your thoughts and feelings with a peer specialist** than with other types of professionals like doctors, therapists, or caseworkers. That could be because you feel more at ease with the peer specialist because you know that they have been through similar experiences, and a peer specialist will discuss things with you using everyday language.<sup>22,23</sup>

**Don’t be afraid to ask a peer specialist about their experience, training, and certifications. You can also ask their supervisor. You have a right to know the qualifications of the person working with you on your recovery.**

**Most peer specialists have a code of ethics and office policies requiring them to protect your right to privacy and confidentiality.** In many cases, laws and regulations require this too. But you can’t expect confidentiality if what you say involves child or elder abuse or neglect or a risk of immediate and serious harm to you or someone else.<sup>24,25,26</sup> That’s because the peer specialist is supposed to report such cases to their supervisor or an administrator.

## What Are Some Tips for Working With a Peer Specialist?

**Let the peer specialist know your boundaries.** Does a pat on the back make you uncomfortable? Do you not want a family member to participate in a home visit? Let your peer specialist know about boundaries like these if the peer specialist hasn’t already asked you about them.

**Respect the peer specialist’s boundaries.** Some actions that may be okay in a relationship with someone you’re close to won’t be okay in your relationship with a peer specialist. Examples include:

- Asking the peer specialist out on a date.
- Offering the peer specialist a side job at your home or workplace.

Some boundaries come from the code of ethics and office policies that the peer specialist follows. These limits help create a safe space for both of you as you work together.

**Understand what roles the peer specialist doesn’t play.** A peer specialist doesn’t:

- Provide medical advice or medication.
- Diagnose conditions like substance use disorder.
- Provide substance use treatment, like counseling.
- Act as a 12-Step sponsor.



And although a peer specialist offers support and companionship, they don't take on the role of a friend, which has different expectations.

**Ask yourself whether you'd prefer a peer specialist who shares certain characteristics with you, like:**

- Age.
- Gender.
- Sexual orientation/gender identity.
- Race/ethnicity.
- Language.
- Cultural background.
- Veteran status.

Having one or more things in common with a peer specialist may help you feel a stronger connection to each other and can help the peer specialist give you more tailored support.<sup>27,28</sup> You can ask the organization providing peer support services to match you with a peer specialist based on your preferences. Keep in mind that the organization may not have enough peer specialists to do this.

## What If My Peer Specialist and I Aren't a Good Match?

As can happen in any type of relationship, you might find that you and the peer specialist aren't a good match. Maybe you just don't "click," for example, or maybe you feel your backgrounds are too different.

**You have a right to feel comfortable around and supported by your peer specialist.** If the two of you can't easily solve an issue, speak with the peer specialist's supervisor. They may be able to fix the situation by giving the peer specialist advice or extra training. In more serious cases, the organization may assign you a different peer specialist or refer you to another place that offers peer support services.

## How Are Peer Support Services Paid For?

Some organizations and treatment programs use government funding or private grants and donations to cover the cost of peer support services. If you have Medicaid, it may pay for these services if you receive them in a treatment or medical setting. (To find contact information for your state's Medicaid agency, go to <https://www.medicaid.gov/about-us/contact-us/index.html> and select your state in the top-right box.) If you have private health insurance, it may help pay for these services, depending on where you receive them.<sup>29,30</sup> Some treatment facilities have sliding-scale fees for people who are uninsured or underinsured. **Ask the place offering these services how the costs will be covered.**



# How Long Do I Work With a Peer Specialist?

**Handling short-term peer support services.** Sometimes your relationship with a peer specialist will end after you leave a particular program. For example, you could go from a residential treatment facility with peer specialists to an outpatient treatment program with its own peer specialist team. Your peer specialist can often help with such transitions.<sup>31</sup> For example, the peer specialist may:

- Give you emotional support if you are in between facilities or programs.
- If you are going someplace else with peer support services, connect you with a peer specialist there.
- Connect you with a peer specialist in a recovery setting, like an RCO.



**Moving on from peer support services.** Some people work with a peer specialist throughout their recovery. But you may someday feel that you don't need one. Ending the partnership can still be hard.

Your peer specialist can suggest ways to wrap up your relationship. If you have a therapist or substance use treatment counselor, you might also talk with them about how to make this transition.

Keep in mind that the relationship can end slowly. You could go from meeting often to occasionally calling, and then texting each other. You may feel sad about no longer working with the peer specialist. But if you reach this point because you've made good progress in recovery, congratulate yourself!

## Conclusion

Recovery takes work and time. You have to keep at it, and you may have setbacks. A peer specialist can support you by offering you hope, understanding, companionship, practical help, and social connections.

**There's no wrong path to receiving peer support services.** Just take the first step so you can get started, and don't give up.



# Appendix

## Consumer Forms

The following forms list things you might want to think about before or as you begin working with a peer specialist. Writing down your thoughts can help you decide how a peer specialist can best support you.

### What Recovery Means to Me

How do you think recovery would improve your life? Use the first group of lines for your answer. If you don't know, use the second group of lines to write down a few questions about recovery to ask a peer specialist.

Recovery means that I:

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I have these questions about recovery:

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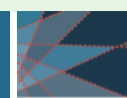
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## Important Things for a Peer Specialist To Know About You

What is the best way for you to stay in touch with a peer specialist?

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What would be good places for you to get together with a peer specialist, and what kinds of situations and environments would you prefer to avoid?

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What is the most important thing a peer specialist should know about you as you work together?

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Are there things about how you were raised or your cultural background that you'd want a peer specialist to know?

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Where would you like to be in your life a year from now?

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What do you see as the biggest challenge in your life right now?

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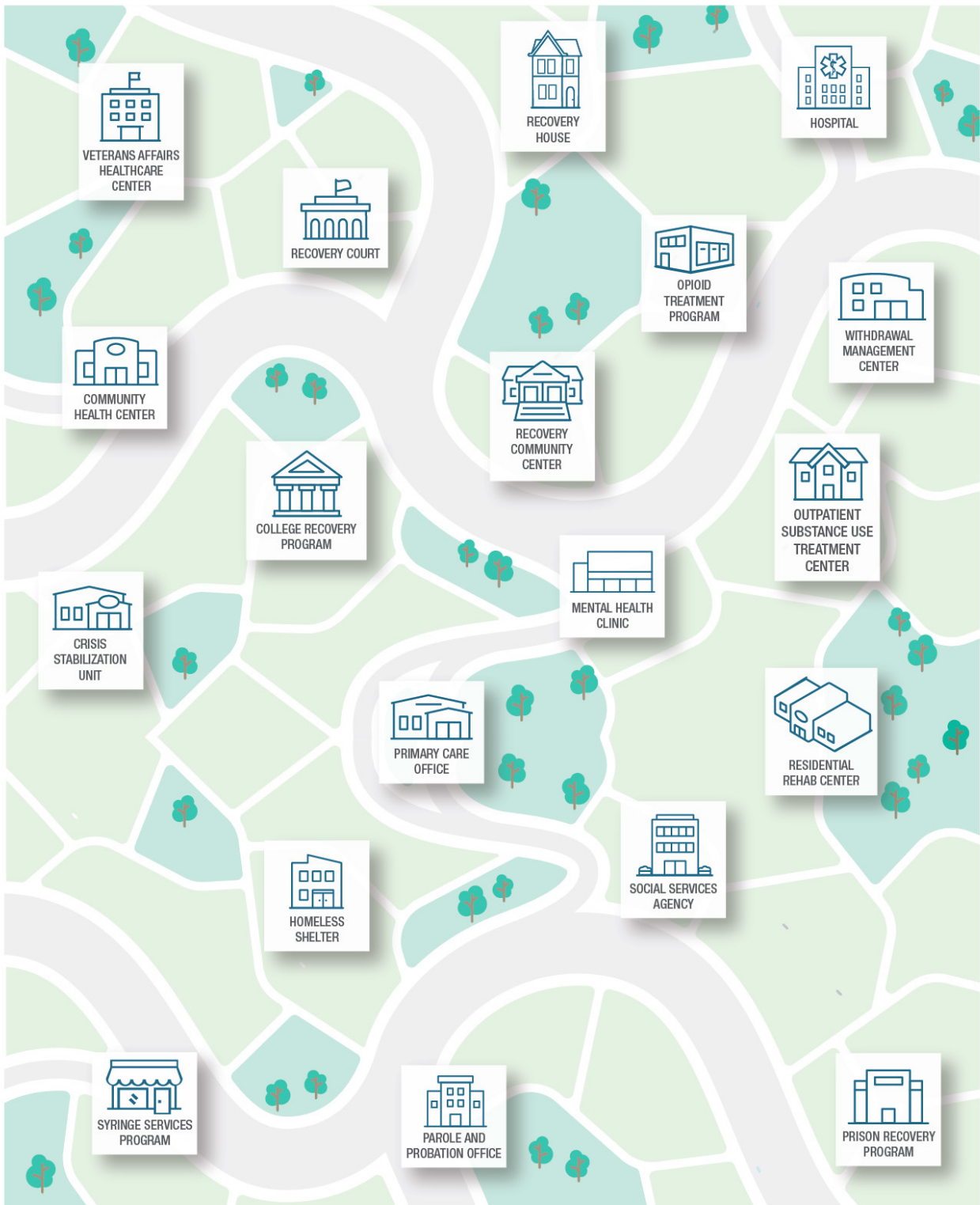
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Source: Adapted with permission.<sup>32</sup>



## Peer Workplaces

Brief descriptions of most of the workplaces in the illustration can be found on the following page in alphabetical order. Not every community will have all the facilities shown, and not all such facilities will provide peer support services.<sup>33</sup>



- **College recovery programs** provide a supportive on-campus environment for students with a history of problematic substance use who want to engage in a recovery lifestyle.<sup>34</sup>
- **Community health centers** are community-based, patient-directed organizations that provide affordable primary care services to people living in underserved areas.<sup>35</sup>
- **Crisis stabilization units** provide short-term observation and crisis stabilization services in a nonhospital environment for people experiencing a substance use or mental health crisis.<sup>36</sup>
- **Homeless shelters** offer a temporary place to live for people experiencing homelessness.
- **Mental health clinics** are outpatient facilities for the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness.<sup>37</sup>
- **Opioid treatment programs** are federally and state-regulated clinics that can provide methadone, buprenorphine, and naltrexone to treat opioid use disorder.<sup>38</sup>
- **Outpatient substance use treatment centers** offer treatment onsite, but clients live at home or elsewhere.
- **Parole and probation offices** oversee people convicted of crime who live in the community.<sup>39</sup>
- **Primary care offices** offer a range of prevention and wellness services and treatment for common illnesses.<sup>40</sup>
- **Recovery community centers** are places where people in or seeking recovery can meet, work with peer specialists, and participate in activities like computer workshops and game nights.<sup>41</sup>
- **Recovery courts** (also called drug courts) give people “the opportunity to enter long-term drug treatment and agree to court supervision rather than receiving a jail sentence.”<sup>42</sup>
- **Recovery houses** are “safe, healthy, family-like substance-free living environments that support individuals in recovery.”<sup>43</sup>
- **Residential rehab centers** offer a living environment with treatment services for people with more serious problematic substance use. Programs can last from 4 weeks to a year.<sup>44</sup>
- **Social services agencies** include child welfare agencies, senior centers, and other public or private agencies intended to improve the well-being of individuals, families, specific populations, and communities.<sup>45</sup>
- **Syringe services programs** offer a range of services to reduce harms connected with injection drug use, including access to sterile syringes and injection equipment.<sup>46</sup>
- **Withdrawal management centers** provide medical or nonmedical withdrawal management for individuals with physical dependence on certain substances, like alcohol and benzodiazepines. Such management is not considered treatment, although it can be an important step toward treatment and recovery.<sup>47</sup>



# Endnotes

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- <sup>10</sup> Valentine, P. (2014, May). *Understanding the role of peer recovery coaches in the addiction profession* [PowerPoint slides]. [https://www.naadac.org/assets/2416/2014-05-01\\_understanding\\_role\\_peer\\_recovery\\_coaches\\_webinar\\_slides.pdf](https://www.naadac.org/assets/2416/2014-05-01_understanding_role_peer_recovery_coaches_webinar_slides.pdf)
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