



A FIELD GUIDE FOR ORGANIZATION LEADERS

Keeping Your Peer Workforce

Why peer supporters leave, and what actually helps them stay

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Peers don't leave for lack of commitment

Peer supporters tend to care deeply about their work. When they leave, it's usually because the job around them made staying too hard.

A 2026 national review by the National Council for Mental Wellbeing concluded that retention challenges are “structural and policy-driven rather than motivational.” That's good news, because structures can change.

WHAT THE RECOVERY COMMUNITY REPORTS

In a 2025 national survey of the recovery community, 51.6% of those who answered named stress, burnout, or turnover as a workplace challenge for peer support workers. 41.6% named pay and benefits, and 38.3% named unclear career advancement.¹

¹ Center for Addiction Recovery Support (CARS), Recovery Community Needs Assessment Report, January 2025, Table 22 (n=548). carsrecovery.org



What the research shows

Two recent sources point the same way: peer jobs have real strengths, but people drift out of them.

People leave peer roles	In a three-year study of 591 certified peer specialists in four states, the share working in peer support positions fell from 73% to 63%, even as overall employment stayed high. ¹
Peer jobs have strengths	In the same study, people in peer jobs reported higher job satisfaction, more access to benefits, and longer average tenure than those in other jobs. ¹
Why people go	A national review found exits are more likely tied to supervision quality, pay, role clarity, and advancement than to a lack of employability or demand. ²
What peers name	Stress and burnout, pay and benefits, and unclear advancement were the workplace challenges named most often in a 2025 national survey. ³

The four pages that follow take these reasons one at a time.

¹ Ostrow, L., Pelot, M., Robinett, K., Salzer, M. S., & Burke-Miller, J. K. Employment Status Following Peer Specialist Certification: Results of a 3-Year Multistate Survey. Psychiatric Services, published online February 13, 2025. doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.20240166

² As reported in National Council for Mental Wellbeing, Workforce Integration Needs Assessment, April 2026.

³ CARS, Recovery Community Needs Assessment Report, January 2025, Table 22. carsrecovery.org

Reason 1: Supervision

Supervision is often the difference between a hard job that's doable and one that isn't.

What goes wrong	Supervision that only happens in a crisis, or that treats peers like clinicians-in-training, leaves peers without the support their role needs.
What the evidence says	In a national study of peer recovery support specialists, satisfaction with supervisor and organizational support was linked to lower burnout and higher job satisfaction. ¹
What helps	Regular, scheduled supervision from someone who understands the peer role. Peer-informed or hybrid supervision where you can. A supervisor who advocates for peers inside the organization. A supervisor who can see caseloads, check-ins, and flagged concerns without asking peers for extra reports.

Supervising Peer Supporters, another guide in this series, goes deeper on doing supervision well.

¹ Krueger, D., Zerden, L., Jensen, T., & Lombardi, B. (2026). Burnout and Job Satisfaction among U.S. Peer Recovery Support Specialists. Community Mental Health Journal, 62(2), 208–218.

Reason 2: Role clarity

Peers who don't know what their job is, or whose job keeps changing, burn out faster.

What goes wrong	Short staffing pulls peers into case management, clinical paperwork, crisis triage, or administrative work. A national review calls this role creep, and links it to role strain, job dissatisfaction, and attrition. ¹
What it costs	The peer loses the part of the job they chose it for. Young people lose the relationship that made peer support work.
What helps	A written scope everyone on the team knows. A supervisor who says no to tasks outside it. Team meetings where peers' work is understood and valued.

EXAMPLE (HYPOTHETICAL)

For example, an organization might notice that its peers now spend much of their week on intake paperwork. Moving that work back to the right role, and telling the team why, can restore the peer role without anyone leaving.

¹ As reported in National Council for Mental Wellbeing, Workforce Integration Needs Assessment, April 2026.

Reason 3: Pay and benefits

Care for the work only goes so far when the paycheck doesn't cover the bills.

What goes wrong	Peer roles are often classified at entry-level wages, and many peer positions don't include full-time benefits such as health insurance, paid leave, and retirement contributions. ¹
What peers say	Pay and benefits were named as a workplace challenge by 41.6% of those who answered a 2025 national survey question on peer workforce challenges. ²
Compare within your team	Look at peer pay next to other roles on the same team doing comparable relationship-based work.
Count the right qualifications	Treat certification and lived experience as qualifications in your pay scale, the way a degree would count. A missing degree shouldn't lower pay for this role, because a degree isn't what makes someone good at peer support.
Match pay to value	Where peer services are billed, check whether peer pay reflects the value that work brings in.

Pay varies widely by state, and federal data can't separate peers from community health workers, so this guide doesn't cite wage figures. Funding rates and rules also vary by state and funder.

¹ As reported in National Council for Mental Wellbeing, Workforce Integration Needs Assessment, April 2026.

² CARS, Recovery Community Needs Assessment Report, January 2025, Table 22 (n=548). carsrecovery.org

Reason 4: No path to grow

Peers want to grow. When the only way up is out of peer work, many take it.

1 Peer supporter

Provides peer support, with room to build skills.

2 Senior peer

Adds mentoring, group facilitation, or work with specialty populations.

3 Advanced peer roles

Peer trainer, quality or fidelity lead, or peer supervisor.

These three steps follow a career ladder described in a 2026 national review, which notes that such roles let peers grow “without requiring peers to exit peer-designated roles or pursue clinical licensure.”¹ Unclear advancement was named by 38.3% of respondents in the 2025 survey.²

A FURTHER STEP ORGANIZATIONS CAN ADD

Leadership: a seat in program design and organizational decisions. This goes beyond the review's ladder, and gives experienced peers a voice in how the work is shaped.

¹ National Council for Mental Wellbeing, Workforce Integration Needs Assessment, April 2026.

² CARS, Recovery Community Needs Assessment Report, January 2025, Table 22 (n=548). carsrecovery.org

What else helps them stay

Beyond the four big reasons, day-to-day conditions matter.

Manageable workloads	Caseloads that leave time to do the work well, and to recover from hard days.
Less paperwork	Documentation that's as simple as your funders allow, in a system the organization provides, so records stay with the program and peers aren't using their own phones.
Flexible scheduling	Hours that fit around school, family, and other commitments.
A culture that values lived experience	Peers treated as full team members, included in meetings and decisions.
Growth and mentorship	Access to training, professional development, and mentors.

A 2026 national review recommends strategies including “manageable caseloads, supportive and peer-informed supervision, reduced administrative burden, flexible scheduling and access to professional development and mentorship opportunities.”¹

¹ National Council for Mental Wellbeing, Workforce Integration Needs Assessment, April 2026.

Small and rural communities

In small places, peers often share neighborhoods, schools, and services with the people they support.

Why it's harder	Limited anonymity and overlapping relationships can add emotional strain and make boundaries harder to hold. ¹
What helps	Clear guidance on dual relationships, supervision that makes room to talk about it, and a plan for when a peer knows a young person outside of work.
Backup	Where possible, arrange for another peer or program to step in when the overlap is too close.

¹ As reported in National Council for Mental Wellbeing, Workforce Integration Needs Assessment, April 2026.

Ask before they leave

The best retention data is what your own peers tell you.

1 Stay conversations

Ask current peers, once or twice a year: What keeps you here? What would make you leave? What would you change?

2 Exit conversations

When a peer leaves, ask why, and write it down. Look for patterns across people.

3 Close the loop

Tell peers what you heard and what you're changing. Nothing builds trust faster.

4 Track the basics

How many peers you have, how long they stay, and why they leave.

EXAMPLE (HYPOTHETICAL)

For example, an organization might learn in stay conversations that peers dread a monthly report that duplicates what's already in the record. Dropping the duplicate report is a small change that tells peers they were heard.



Ready to track retention in your program? Blueprints, step-by-step toolkits for program leaders, are at shareandsolve.app/#blueprints.

Retention checklist

The more you can check, the better your chances of keeping the peers you have.

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- ☐ Every peer has regular, scheduled supervision from someone who understands the role
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 - ☐ Supervisors advocate for peers inside the organization
 -
 - ☐ Peers have a written scope, and the team respects it
 -
 - ☐ Peer pay is compared with other roles on the team, and certification and lived experience count as qualifications
 -
 - ☐ There's a visible path from peer supporter to senior and leadership roles
 -
 - ☐ Workloads leave time to do the work well
 -
 - ☐ Schedules can flex around school, family, and life
 -
 - ☐ Peers are included in team meetings and decisions
 -
 - ☐ We hold stay conversations, and learn from why people leave
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ABOUT

Share+Solve and Peer Bridge

Share+Solve and Peer Bridge help organizations run their own youth peer support programs. They don't replace your peer supporters, your training, or your program. They give the work you already do a safe, supervised home.

Share+Solve

Where peers and young people connect: messaging, check-ins, goals, and meet-ups, with a one-tap 988 call button on the home screen.

Peer Bridge

Where supervisors see the whole program: caseloads, check-ins, escalations, and program-level reporting.

Private conversations between peers and young people stay between them. Your organization controls its program data, and deletion requests are handled through the platform.

Built by John Dellick, MBA, a nationally recognized peer support professional with nearly a decade in youth peer support and behavioral health.



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