
Health Care & Wellness Committee

2SSB 5555

Brief Description: Creating the profession of certified peer specialists.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Ways & Means (originally sponsored by Senators Randall, Dhingra, Hasegawa, Keiser, Nguyen, Nobles, Valdez and Wilson, C.).

Brief Summary of Second Substitute Bill

- Establishes certified peer specialists and certified peer specialist trainees as new health professions to be certified by the Department of Health.
- Directs the Health Care Authority to develop and offer an 80-hour education course for persons seeking to become certified as a peer specialist or peer specialist trainee.
- Establishes standards and training for approved supervisors of certified peer specialist trainees.
- Establishes training requirements for certified peer specialists practicing as peer crisis responders.

Hearing Date: 3/15/23

Staff: Christopher Blake (786-7392).

Background:

The Health Care Authority (Authority) certifies peer counselors under its Peer Support Program. Certification by the Authority is not necessary to provide peer counseling services, however, it is required for reimbursement under Medicaid. To be certified, a person must:

- self-identify as a person with lived experience in behavioral health recovery or as a parent or legal guardian of a child under 18 years old who experienced behavioral health

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- challenges;
- demonstrate having been well-grounded in their recovery for at least one year and willing to tell their story;
- demonstrate basic reading and writing comprehension;
- be registered by the Department of Health as an agency-affiliated counselor;
- be at least 18 years old;
- have a high school diploma or GED;
- complete an online prerequisite course;
- complete specialized training approved by the Authority; and
- pass an examination administered by the Authority.

The services that may be provided by certified peer counselors are specified in Washington's Medicaid State Plan (State Plan). The State Plan authorizes them to provide peer support services which are defined as scheduled activities that promote socialization, recovery, self-advocacy, development of natural supports, and maintenance of community living skills. Since July 1, 2019, behavioral health agencies have been able to provide peer support services for both mental health and substance use disorders and receive Medicaid reimbursement.

Summary of Bill:

Beginning July 1, 2025, certified peer specialists and certified peer specialist trainees are established as new health professions that may engage in the practice of peer support services. "Practice of peer support services" means the provision of interventions by either: (1) a person in recovery from a mental health condition, substance use disorder, or both; or (2) the parent or legal guardian of a youth who is receiving or has received behavioral health services. The interventions are provided to a client through the use of shared experiences to assist a client in the acquisition and exercise of shared skills to support the client's recovery. Interventions may include activities that assist a client in accessing or engaging in treatment and in symptom management; promote social connection, recovery, and self-advocacy; provide guidance in the development of community supports and basic daily living skills; and support clients in achieving health and wellness goals.

The Secretary of Health (Secretary) must issue certificates as a peer specialist to applicants who:

- submit an attestation to the Department of Health (Department) that the applicant self-identifies as: (1) a person with one or more years of recovery from a mental health condition, substance use disorder, or both; or (2) a parent or legal guardian of a youth who is receiving or has received behavioral health services;
- complete an education course developed and offered by the Health Care Authority (Authority);
- pass an oral examination administered by the Authority;
- pass a written examination approved by the Authority;
- complete an experience requirement of at least 1,000 hours as a certified peer specialist trainee engaged in the practice of peer support services under the supervision of an approved supervisor; and

- pay any applicable fees.

Alternatively, an applicant may receive a peer specialist certificate based on previous experience as a peer specialist prior to July 1, 2025. The Secretary must adopt equivalency standards that an applicant may meet to be eligible for such a certificate by July 1, 2026. In addition, the Secretary, with the recommendations of the Washington State Certified Peer Specialist Advisory Committee (Advisory Committee), must adopt criteria for the issuance of a certificate as a peer specialist based on completion of an approved apprenticeship program.

The Secretary must also issue certificates for peer specialist trainees to practice peer support services under the supervision of an approved supervisor while completing the experience requirement to obtain a full certificate as a peer specialist. To obtain a certificate as a peer specialist trainee, an applicant must have either met the attestation, education, and oral and written examination requirements for a peer specialist or be enrolled in an approved apprenticeship program. In addition, the applicant must submit a declaration that the applicant is actively pursuing the supervised experience requirement for a full certificate. An approved supervisor is either: (1) until July 1, 2027, a behavioral health provider with at least two years of experience working in a behavioral health practice that employs peer specialists in treatment teams; or (2) a certified peer specialist with at least 1,500 hours of work as a certified peer specialist, including at least 500 hours in the joint supervision of peers, and who has completed a peer supervisor training course developed by the Authority.

A registered agency-affiliated counselor who engages in the practice of peer support services and whose agency bills medical assistance for those services must be certified by January 1, 2027.

If an applicant for a certificate to become an agency-affiliated counselor, peer specialist or peer specialist trainee has been referred to the voluntary substance abuse monitoring program, the amount of time that the applicant must spend in the program is limited to the amount of time necessary for the applicant to achieve one year in recovery from a substance use disorder. If the applicant has at least one year in recovery from a substance use disorder, the applicant may not be required to participate. Facilities that care for vulnerable adults are prohibited from automatically denying employment to an applicant for a position as an agency-affiliated counselor practicing as a peer counselor, a peer specialist or peer specialist trainee if: (1) at least one year has passed since the most recent conviction and the date of application; (2) the offense was committed as a result of the applicant's substance use or untreated mental health symptoms; and (3) the applicant has been in recovery for at least one year from a mental health disorder or substance use disorder, whether through abstinence or stability on medication-assisted therapy.

The Advisory Committee is established with staffing support provided by the Department. The Secretary must appoint the 11 members of the Advisory Committee, which include nine members who are certified peer specialists, one member who represents community behavioral health agencies, and one member who represents the public at large. The Advisory Committee is responsible for submitting recommendations which the Department or Authority, as appropriate, are encouraged to adopt on topics including: rules for certifying peer specialists and peer

specialist trainees; aspects of peer support related to complaints and the disciplinary process; patient and client education; certification examinations; continuing education and continuing competency programs; criteria for certification based on prior experience; supports for becoming a peer specialist; the feasibility of a two-phase certification program; Authority policies related to peer counselors; the approval of additional education and testing entities; long-term planning for the profession; recruitment and retention in the peer specialist profession; and the elimination of financial barriers to credentialing.

While the Department is the primary certification entity for peer specialists and peer specialist trainees, the Authority has several specific responsibilities in the certification process. The Authority must develop and offer the instruction course for peer specialist certification. The course must be approximately 80 hours and based on the Authority's existing course with additional instruction in the principles of recovery coaching and suicide prevention, and additional subjects suggested pursuant to a peer engagement process. The instruction course must have multiple configurations to allow for both accelerated and extended completion. In addition, the Authority must develop an expedited course for those who have completed the existing course and only need to complete the new portions of the course.

The Authority must develop and offer additional trainings, including a training course for peer specialists providing supervision to peer specialist trainees, a 40-hour specialized training course in peer crisis response services, and a course on the benefits of incorporating certified peer specialists and certified peer specialist trainees into clinical staff. Beginning July 1, 2025, peer specialists working as peer crisis responders must have completed the Authority's 40-hour peer crisis response training.

The Authority is responsible for developing, conducting, and administering examinations, including assuring that the examinations are administered in a culturally appropriate manner and adopting procedures to accommodate persons with a learning disability, other disabilities, and other needs. The Authority must approve educational and testing entities to provide educational courses and administer examinations. The Authority must also develop examination preparation materials and make them available to students.

Behavioral health agencies must reduce the caseload for approved supervisors who are providing supervision to certified peer specialist trainees according to standards established by the Advisory Committee.

By July 1, 2026, each health carrier must provide access to certified peer specialists and certified peer specialist trainees in a manner sufficient to meet network access standards established by the Office of the Insurance Commissioner in rule.

The bill is null and void if it is not specifically referenced in the operating budget by June 30, 2023.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date: The bill contains multiple effective dates. Please see the bill. However, the bill is null and void unless funded in the budget.