

# The Art of Listening:

## How peer coaching can help people recover from addiction and mental health struggles

### THE TAKEAWAY

Peer coaching can be a powerful tool to help people recover from substance use disorder and address mental health problems. Philanthropy can build capacity for this work by supporting:

- Organizations that train peer coaches
- Recovery-friendly workplaces
- Nonprofits that hire peer coaches



There's an art to motivating people and it rarely starts with unsolicited advice. In fact, when peer coaches are trying to help someone with an addiction to drugs or alcohol, or a person in a mental health crisis, often the first step is to listen.

"The goal is really to meet people where they are in a moment of great need," said Will Eberle, executive director of the Vermont Association for Mental Health & Addiction Recovery (VAMHAR), a Montpelier nonprofit that trains about 100 peer coaches annually, many of whom are in long-term recovery themselves.

Peer coaches try to help individuals better understand themselves and explore motivations for change. "It's really about establishing that trust and allowing the

person to be in the driver's seat," Eberle said.

Skilled peer coaches, also sometimes referred to as peer support workers, are increasingly being recognized as important professionals in the continuum of care for people who are on the path to recovery and for people who experience mental health challenges. [About one in five Vermont adults](#) are living with mental illness, and an estimated 12,000 Vermont residents [exit SUD recovery programs](#) annually.

Peer coaches can play a vital role in helping people succeed, whatever their situation or stage of recovery. Peer coaches work in many settings, including hospital emergency rooms. They visit homeless shelters and sober houses. They lead one-on-ones at the state's substance use disorder recovery centers.



National research suggests peer coaching can help reduce substance use, hospitalizations, and involvement in the criminal justice system while it builds empowerment and hope. In Vermont, where both [opioid deaths](#) and suicides have hit record levels in recent years, hope is needed more than ever. So are investments in solutions such as peer coaching that have potential to save lives, save money, and create meaningful jobs.

## It's about establishing trust.

To help with this goal, the Vermont Community Foundation has identified peer coaching as one part of a broader strategy to support health and wellness. The aim is to build stronger systems of care and a workforce of people who can assist Vermonters in crisis and get them to the next step, whether that is recovery or ongoing mental health treatment or both.

"The good news is that recovery is possible and thousands of Vermonters every year are entering into recovery and rebuilding their lives," said Andy Barker, a program officer at the Vermont Community Foundation who is focused on this initiative.

### **Meanwhile, charitable individuals can get involved by supporting:**

#### **Training for peer coaches**

VAMHAR trains peer coaches who work in substance use disorder recovery with a 40-hour course followed by apprenticeships and certification. Most have overcome addiction themselves and can draw on personal experience to inform their work and inspire people they are trying to help. "It's so important to see people who have made it to the other side," Eberle said.

Support for training can help build a strong peer

workforce that is designed to supplement but not replace clinical professionals such as doctors and psychologists who are involved in recovery care but may be more difficult and more expensive to access. Charitable giving for training can also help VAMHAR meet its goal to recruit a more diverse pool of people to be peer coaches, including more BIPOC and LGBTQ+ individuals.

When it comes to training peer coaches to improve mental health outcomes, Winooski nonprofit Pathways Vermont is leading the way and offers a range of courses at its Training Institute. More coaches are needed to work with people experiencing mental health challenges, especially in hospital ERs that can be a traumatic setting, said Laurie Emerson, director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Vermont.

#### **Recovery-friendly workplaces**

Many good things in life take time, and that's true for recovery, too. It takes time to attend group meetings. To talk one on one with a counselor or peer coach. To nurture friendships with people who will support a healthy lifestyle. One of the ways to help deal with this time crunch is to create supports for recovery in the place that many people spend most of their waking hours: Work.

Increasingly, employers are realizing that bringing recovery services on-site such as peer coaching and group meetings can go a long way to help employees, build productivity, and boost retention. "It creates additional loyalty and meaning around someone's work because they are not only going there for a paycheck, for a job," said Lisa Lord, director of workforce development at VAMHAR. "There's this really strong community that's part of work."

Lord helps companies design recovery-friendly programming that may go beyond the traditional employee assistance program benefits. Often, companies start by reviewing current policies: Are they clear enough? Do they offer enough flexibility?



It's also a good idea to survey employees to see what they want. One company dramatically increased its number of on-site recovery meetings at the request of employees, Lord said. The move recognized that group meetings are a foundational part of recovery for many people but "they can be really challenging to work into your schedule."

Some employers ask employees if they are interested in being trained as a coach, or they work with a nonprofit to create access to coaches. Either way, the best coaches help people believe in themselves. Peer coaches do not give unsolicited advice because it often comes across as criticism, Lord said. "There's a philosophy in recovery coaching that it's power with, not power over."

## Nonprofits that hire peer coaches

Support for organizations that hire peer coaches and connect them with those in need goes a long way. Last year, the Turning Point Center of Chittenden County, a Burlington recovery center, employed about 40 coaches who served 877 people. "We're on the front line seven days a week, 365 days a year," said Cam Lauf, executive director. Turning Point coaches go to shelters, hotels, motels, and the hospital ER.

**We're on the front line  
seven days a week.**

These coaches help people connect to services and let them know someone cares. While Vermont overdose data is daunting, Lauf is optimistic about signs that more and more people want to get into recovery. Donations make up 30 percent of the center's operating budget. Continuing support from philanthropy can help recovery centers such as Turning Point meet growing demand for services such as peer coaching. The goal is to "expand wages and benefits and really care for the people on the front lines doing this," Lauf said.

Lauf recently celebrated nine years in recovery from heroin addiction and credits the Turning Point Center for helping him succeed. He still remembers the optimism he felt walking through the door for the first time and tries to keep that front and center in the work today.

"People saw me for me," Lauf recalled. "I didn't feel judged, and I felt at home, and I felt safe."

## Join us in supporting this work

- 1 Ready to open a fund so you can support this work in partnership with us? [Click here](#) to learn more about opening a donor advised fund at the Vermont Community Foundation or to connect with a philanthropic advisor.
- 2 Have a donor advised fund with us? [Click here](#) to support peer coaching through our Health & Wellbeing Opportunity in your DonorCentral account.
- 3 Want to learn more about our strategies and grantmaking to expand support for peer coaching? [Visit](#) our Health & Wellbeing page to watch a video from Program Officer Andy Barker.

## Deeper reading

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, (SAMHSA) [Value of Peers](#)

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