



Via Hope Peer Specialist Readiness for Training Guide

Thank you for your interest in attending Via Hope’s Certified Peer Specialist training. Working as a Certified Peer Specialist (CPS) can be an immensely rewarding occupation. It is a way to help others experience the recovery from mental illness that you have experienced yourself. However, it is not the job for everyone, and it is one that you need to be ready to undertake. This note is intended to familiarize you with the field of peer support, the Via Hope peer specialist training and certification process, and things to consider before you make the decision to apply for this training.

What is Peer Support and Peer Support services?

Peer support is the act of people who have had similar experiences with mental illnesses giving each other encouragement, hope, assistance, guidance, and understanding that aids in recovery. Peer support services are programs, discussions, events, groups, etc. within the mental health system that are led by people in recovery and based on the philosophy of peer support. They take place within the structure of an agency or organization and are provided as a service by a trained peer specialist.

Who are Certified Peer Specialists?

Peer Specialists are individuals who are in recovery from a mental illness and who use their lived experience to assist other individuals in their own recovery. Peer specialists provide a variety of peer support services; however, their primary asset is their ability to share their story and inspire hope for recovery. Certified Peer Specialists (CPSs) have had specialized training to enable them to provide peer support more effectively and have passed a certification exam to demonstrate their competence. CPSs work in a variety of treatment settings—community mental health centers, psychiatric hospitals and consumer-run organizations are some common settings that employ peers.

Via Hope Peer Specialist Training and Certification

Via Hope provides a training and certification program for peer specialists. The basic Via Hope Peer Specialist Training requires 40 hours over five days, and covers topics such as Five Stages in the Recovery Process, the Role of Peer Support in Recovery, Effective Listening, Ethics, and the relationship between mental and physical health (Whole Health). The curriculum is structured to train Texas peer specialists in skills and content universal to peer support issues as well as to provide an understanding of the resources and systems unique to our state.

***Via Hope is a collaborative effort of Mental Health America of Texas
and the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Texas***

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The application process for peer specialist training includes a written application, two letters of reference, and a brief telephone interview. The letters of reference should be from individuals that can speak to your recovery and your ability to relate to and work with other individuals. The application process is designed to determine whether the individual is far enough along in their personal recovery to benefit from the training and is a suitable candidate for a position as a peer specialist. Working as a certified peer specialist is a very rewarding position, but it can also be somewhat stressful and is not for everyone.

Demand for the training generally exceeds our capacity, so the program uses a priority system to determine who is selected. Among other factors, priority is given to individuals who are already working as peer specialists but without formal training, and to individuals who have firm job offers conditional upon taking the training. The Via Hope CPS training program is specifically designed for those who want to work or volunteer in this field.

Training Readiness

There are some points to consider as you make your decision about attending this training:

- The course provides frequent short breaks, but is intensive and can be fatiguing. Do you have the energy to stay focused and alert?
- If you are traveling, you must be out of town for the entire week plus travel time. Are you prepared to spend that much time away from home?
- You must attend the full five days of training. If you miss four class hours or more for any reason, you will have to retake the entire class.
- Training is highly interactive and requires activities that involve working in small groups, role playing, and public readings. Are you comfortable with these types of participation?
- Have you attended either formal or adult education classes in the past five years? If not, you might find it difficult to adjust to the training environment.
- You will be expected to participate in discussions and role play using elements of your own recovery story. Are you comfortable sharing your recovery story with others?
- You will also be required to listen to the recovery stories of others. Sometimes these stories might be uncomfortable, particularly if they touch upon one of your “triggers.”

Cost of Training

Via Hope tries to ensure that finances are not a barrier to anyone participating in the training. We do not charge registration, and we pay the hotel costs for people attending. Breakfast, lunch, and snack breaks are provided during each day’s training. You are on your own for dinner. It is also your responsibility to get yourself back and forth from your home to the city



where the training is held. Most people attending the training have an employer who can cover these expenses. If not, and finances would pose a barrier for you to attend, we have scholarships available. More information about these will be provided if you are selected for the class.

If you are currently employed and will need to take off work to attend training, please discuss this with your supervisor before applying. We are unable to compensate you for any lost wages due to taking time off from work.

The Testing and Certification Process

In addition to taking the training, an individual must pass a written exam to be certified. The certification exam is administered online approximately two weeks following completion of the training, and individuals are notified approximately three weeks later whether they have passed the exam. (a paper copy of the exam is available for anyone who is unable to take it online.) Individuals that pass the exam are certified as a Via Hope Peer Specialist for a period of two years. To renew their certification, Via Hope Certified Peer Specialists are required to complete 20 hours of continuing education units (CEUs) every two years. These CEUs can be earned through attendance at approved conferences or through approved training in specialized content areas. Please refer to the Policy and Procedure Manual on our website for additional information about CEU requirements.

Next Steps

If you are ready for the next step, complete the Certified Peer Specialist application. Be sure to submit it by the deadline on the application! If you have questions about the training, contact the Via Hope Lead Peer Specialist Trainer, Neal Nored, at 512-471-5397 or 1-877-482-8550 or by email at nnored@namitexas.org. If you need assistance with arrangements to attend, contact the Via Hope training coordinator, Nancy Arnold, at 512-471-5035 or 1-877-482-8550 or by email at narnold@namitexas.org.