



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From Recidivism to Recovery The Case for Peer Support in Texas Correctional Facilities

In this paper, *From Recidivism to Recovery: The Case for Peer Support in Texas Correctional Facilities*, we explore the use of mental health peer support services as one way to support recovery, improve continuity of care, and reduce recidivism for inmates with mental illness during the re-entry process.

Mental health peer support is a cost-effective, evidence-based practice that improves clinical and social outcomes for individuals with mental illness. Texas is currently home to a Certified Peer Specialist training and certification program, and both Texas state hospitals and Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs) have successfully utilized peer support services in their facilities and continue to grow their peer support specialist workforce. There is growing interest nationwide in bringing the clinical and social benefits of peer support into the criminal justice system for justice-involved individuals with mental illness.

A substantial share of Texas inmates has mental health needs. In state correctional facilities, 35 percent of inmates have previously received public mental health services. In local Texas county jails, up to 40 percent of bookings in 2013 were for individuals who had previously received public mental health services. Incarcerating, rather than treating, individuals with mental illness comes at a high fiscal and human cost. Incarceration in a state prison or local jail costs, on average, anywhere from \$42 to \$138 per day per inmate, while providing community-based mental health services costs only \$12 per day per client.

Moreover, Texas inmates with mental illness are more likely to return to jail or prison than inmates without, pointing to the difficulties associated with transitioning from a correctional facility to the community. Barriers to successful community re-entry for inmates with mental illness can include a lack of continuity in mental or physical care as well as difficulty establishing access to basic services such as housing or transportation.

Peer support re-entry programming can play an important role in reducing human suffering and containing costs by ensuring that inmates successfully transition from correctional facilities into more cost-effective and clinically appropriate community-based services post-release.



A successful program model exists to inform a Texas pilot project. Peerstar, LLC, a private provider organization in Pennsylvania, has established an innovative peer support re-entry program in local Pennsylvania county jails. Peerstar employs a peer in-reach program model wherein trained and certified Forensic Peer Specialists go into local correctional facilities to provide peer support services to inmates with mental illness prior to release as part of the re-entry process. The program boasts a growing body of evidence showcasing significantly reduced rates of recidivism for program participants, a robust partnership with the Yale School of Medicine, and an expanding number of counties served since its inception in 2010.

We propose that Peerstar's successful program model inform future peer support re-entry policy and program efforts in Texas. An analysis of Texas' current re-entry landscape for inmates with mental illness reveals a need for additional continuity of care programming at the point of community re-entry, especially at the local jail level. A re-entry peer support program, modeled after Peerstar's successful peer in-reach program, can fill gaps where services are limited or unavailable.

We recommend that Texas develop a pilot program in a local county jail, taking into account the following concepts and considerations:

1. **Focus on re-entry.** Reduce recidivism and produce cost savings by integrating peer support into the re-entry process.
2. **Start local.** Fill the gap in local re-entry services, reduce recidivism for non-violent offenders, and build a body of evidence for scalable state-wide programming.
3. **Forge community partnerships.** Identify a community partner with the appropriate infrastructure and resources to administer a peer support re-entry program.
4. **Integrate with existing systems.** Align the program with successful policies and procedures already in place in local jails.
5. **Leverage existing partnerships.** Work with local and national partners and use the existing peer support training and certification infrastructure to create a forensic peer support curriculum for Texas.
6. **Emphasize Recovery.** Encourage program and organizational practices that support recovery and maximize the efficacy and contributions of peer providers.

We also offer policy recommendations to broadly improve access to mental health services and easy reentry transitions for inmates with mental illness. Texas should conduct additional research and, where appropriate, take action on the following policy items:

1. **Reassess state employment bars** affecting justice-involved peers.
2. **Allocate funding for CMHCs to serve individuals with mental illness beyond the target diagnoses of schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and major depression.**
3. **Expand continuity of care standards to include local jails and inmates being released on flat discharge.**
4. **Expand successful Continuity of Care and Case Management re-entry programs to serve more inmates in more areas of the state.**
5. **Accept federal dollars to expand eligibility** for public health care coverage to Texas adults living below the poverty line.

Texas has an opportunity to provide national policy leadership in a growing field at the pivotal intersection between mental health and criminal justice. The road map forward involves additional stakeholder deliberation, cross-community learning, and collaboration, and we hope that this paper will launch the movement to engage stakeholders, establish partnerships, and explore funding and legislative opportunities for advancing a peer support re-entry pilot initiative.

Additional technical detail on forensic peer support programming and the Texas re-entry landscape is available in the appendices. Please refer to these sections for more information.