

Vocational Peer Support: A New Specialization for Peers Supporting Employment

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People who are in recovery from the impact of a psychiatric diagnosis have long supported each other to succeed in areas such as work and school. However, people have not always had specialized tools that could support them.

Now there is a training program that is designed especially for peer support specialists who want to gain the competencies and tools they need to work with people in their vocational aspirations.

Vocational Peer Support has recently been developed as part of the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC) on Improving Employment Outcomes for People with Psychiatric Disabilities at the Boston University Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation. The RRTC is jointly funded by NIDRR and SAMHSA, under the direction of Marianne Farkas and E. Sally Rogers, Co-Principal Investigators.

How did VPS come about?

VPS is a culmination of previous work at the Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation at Boston University, integrated with innovations in peer specialist training. The training curriculum brings together experiential and academic knowledge related to vocational recovery and came about through the work of two colleagues: Lyn Legere, who ran the Certified Peer Specialist Training and Certification Program in Massachusetts with the Transformation Center, and Debbie Nicolellis, who headed the Certificate Program in Psychiatric Vocational Rehabilitation at Boston University. With inquiries from peer support organizations in mind, they were determined to blend the essence of both programs to teach peer specialists how to support recovery through employment. The RRTC offered a perfect opportunity to lend the support and time needed to bring about

this vision for a training program that could promote vocational recovery in a new way. The two worked with peer support training and vocational rehabilitation experts from around the country, as well as consultation and support from Marianne Farkas, to create an advanced specialization for peer specialists who have an interest in supporting employment and education. VPS is currently being tested in a randomized clinical trial under the direction of Sally Rogers.

What is VPS?

VPS is an approach to supporting people with psychiatric disabilities to explore, pursue and achieve vocational recovery. VPS gives peer specialists additional skills they can use when supporting people with their vocational aspirations. VPS is an advanced specialization in peer support, which builds upon core peer support competencies and knowledge. VPS is not a new role for peer workers, rather, VPS offers a toolbox of information, skills and tools that add to the core functions of peer support.

What is Vocational Recovery?

Vocational Recovery is an individualized journey of claiming or reclaiming one's right and capacity to pursue, attain and achieve meaningful vocational paths. Vocational recovery is more than getting a job; it is considering, going after, and sustaining, for as long as the person wants to or needs to, the vocational experiences that give meaning, purpose, and activity to one's life. VPS recognizes that "meaningful vocational experiences" can mean different things to different people, and involves the full gamut of work and school experiences, including (but not limited to) learning about different career options, volunteering to gain experience, working at a variety of jobs, or getting a doctorate in a specialized field.

How does VPS differ from other employment support approaches?

VPS is inspired by existing employment support approaches, but has some essential differences. VPS builds on the critical ingredients of CPS work, including modeling recovery, inspiring hope, and working from a place of mutuality. It also builds on the work of Karen Danley and Bill Anthony on Choose-Get-Keep (CGK), which has its foundations in Psychiatric Rehabilitation. Since the 1980's, CGK has helped to change the paradigm of the helper-driven approach (i.e. Assessment-Placement-Follow Along), to a person directed approach in which the person is supported to choose a preferred

role and environment, get into the job or training program of choice, and to keep it for as long as it is needed or wanted.

VPS brings together the best of both peer support and psychiatric rehabilitation approaches to support vocational recovery by working side-by-side with people to gather the skills and resources they need as they consider, choose, get, and keep work and/or school.

How is a peer specialist who provides VPS different from an employment specialist?

It is important that peer workers using VPS remain in their roles as peer specialists. Peer specialists (also sometimes referred to as Recovery Coaches) do not guide, direct, or “motivate” people to seek work. In VPS, the emphasis is not on “helping”, but rather on mutual support, i.e., on people supporting each other in their vocational recovery. It is essential to VPS that peer workers inspire hope for vocational recovery through the sharing of Vocational Recovery Stories and through supporting people as they consider, choose, get, and keep work and school. In addition, basic peer support practices such as “being a listening ear” and “accompanying” enhance success in accessing and reaping the benefits of employment support systems. By increasing people’s capacity and confidence through information, experience, and resources related to work, and by working from a mutual peer perspective, peer workers using VPS provide a new kind of employment service.

How do people get trained in VPS?

A 10-module training program has been piloted and tested in several states across the U.S. The training blends both in-person and distance training modalities, with ongoing support functions built in. The in-person training focuses on competency-building, with large and small group discussions, in-class exercises that concentrate on developing awareness and skill, and orientation to the VPS Toolkit, which is designed to support everyday practice. Participants are asked to complete assignments between training sessions, with the intent of fostering community connections and practicing new skills. Distance learning components include conference calls and individualized mentoring, to support ongoing work trainees are doing at their workplaces. Class size is kept low to foster engagement in a participatory learning environment whenever possible.

Who is VPS training for?

The curriculum is designed for peer specialists who have been trained in the essentials of peer support, and who are already working in the field. Without this conceptual and practical background, peers may struggle to apply the knowledge and skills gained in VPS training. There are elements for supervisors as well, and it is recommended that supervisors of peer specialists using this approach also participate.

What are the pre-requisites for VPS training?

VPS adds skills and tools, so it is essential that peer specialists be well-versed in general peer practice. Peer specialists are most successful in becoming competent in VPS if they are already adept at peer support skills such as: modeling recovery, telling their own recovery story, providing mutual support, and being "in but not of" the system.

What is included in VPS training?

The training is arranged in individual modules of 1/2 day to 1 day each. The entire course is designed to be 5-6 days in length, and to involve both informational and competency-building components. Some of the key modules are listed here:

- Partnering for Vocational Recovery
- Building Motivational Foundations
- Supporting Choice in Work and School
- Scaffolding Getting into Preferred Environments
- Keeping Jobs and School
- Social Security Work Incentives (optional 6th day)

Trainees receive training materials, a practical Toolkit for everyday use, and ongoing support from trainers. A VPS Train the Trainer curriculum has been piloted, and an Implementation Kit for programs and supervisors is in development at this writing.

Who can be contacted for more information about VPS training?

Dr. Marianne Farkas, Director of Training, may be contacted at mfarkas@bu.edu, or 617/353-3549.

Debbie Nicolellis, VPS training developer, can be contacted at debbien@bu.edu.

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Developers of VPS

Debbie Nicolellis, M.S., C.R.C. is responsible for the development and operation of the Vocational Peer Support training project. Debbie also directs the Certificate Program in Psychiatric Vocational Rehabilitation, through which providers of mental health and rehabilitation services learn how to effectively provide employment supports. Debbie has written curricula, articles and book chapters on a variety of topics in psychiatric rehabilitation, and for over 15 years has had the honor of teaching people in recovery, peer workers, practitioners and others the methods that help people to find meaning and purpose in their lives.

Lyn Legere, M.S., C.P.R.P., C.P.S. is the Lead Consultant on the VPS training project, adding invaluable expertise to the VPS curriculum and training endeavors. Lyn is currently working to develop peer training and peer services around the country. Lyn has helped to change the landscape through training and consultation in psychiatric rehabilitation, recovery-oriented services, CPS training and integration of peer services in traditional mental health settings. Lyn has won awards for her work from the Massachusetts and US Psychiatric Rehabilitation Associations and has written and taught extensively domestically and internationally.

For more information on this project, contact Dr. Farkas at 617-353-3549 or mfarkas@bu.edu

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