ACCREDITATION & CERTIFICATION
BENEFITS, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEER SUPPORT

In recent years, a popular approach to quality assurance has been to establish certification programs for individual peer supporters at the state level. In reaction to this trend, many experts in the field have expressed reservations about the impact of certification on peer support programs and the peer support workforce.

We believe that accreditation is an alternative and complementary approach to certification that can validate the quality of peer support services in any state, whether it has a certification program or not. In this brief, we'll take a look at organizational accreditation and how it can benefit the field of peer support.

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BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF CERTIFICATION

Certification is useful to assure that individuals are qualified to serve as peer supporters. It can standardize training in core competencies, elevate the social standing of peer supporters, and open up opportunities for better reimbursement. The two main tracks in state certification are for mental health peer specialists and community health workers.

In states that have certification programs, training and certification is administered through approved agencies, such as community colleges. This arrangement can create barriers for people who want to be peer supporters, such as minimum educational prerequisites, cost of tuition and transportation, language and cultural barriers, and fears related to immigration status. Many in the field are concerned that these barriers, left unaddressed, will lead to the development of a certified peer support workforce that is less representative of the populations they serve.

Furthermore, there are concerns that certification is leading towards the professionalization and medicalization of peer supporters, transplanting them from the community to the clinic. Peer support jobs have been regarded as early career ladder positions, meaning that turnover is not only expected, but beneficial for the workforce. However, certification has the potential increase the amount of people that want to become career peer supporters. Eventually, the peer support workforce may be divided into several competing camps: certified and non-certified, career and temporary.

Quality assurance isn't an easy process, but some of the concerns that have been raised about certification made us stop and wonder whether this was the best or the only approach. While certification demonstrates that individuals are qualified to serve as peer supporters, what mechanism do we have to show that organizations have the policies, the capacity, and the qualities to implement and sustain a peer support program?

WHAT IS ACCREDITATION?

Accreditation is an evaluation and approval process for organizations to deliver a set of services. In many ways, accreditation is like a "seal of excellence" that an organization can obtain in return for demonstrating quality, value, and optimal outcomes.

Accrediting bodies are third-party institutions that ensure recognized standards are met. In healthcare, some examples of accrediting bodies include the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations and the National Council for Quality Assurance.

HOW DOES ACCREDITATION DIFFER FROM CERTIFICATION?

Accreditation and certification represent different and complementary approaches to quality assurance. Whereas accreditation focuses on the quality of the services provided by an organization, certification

serves as proof that an individual is qualified with the essential knowledge and skills to serve in a specific role.

Accreditation and certification systems often work together. For instance, many states may have certification requirements for individual professionals or practitioners. In such cases, organizational accreditation ensures that certified individuals are supported with sound organizational systems and policies.

HOW CAN ACCREDITATION BENEFIT PEER SUPPORT PROGRAMS?

Currently, the trend in many states favors certification of peer supporters. However, certification can change some of the fundamental ways in which peer support is provided and who it is provided by. For example, the standardized training curriculums required in certification may lead to an overemphasis on clinical skills and lead to the medicalization of the peer support workforce. When certification programs only accept students that have a minimum high school education and English proficiency, they can be excluding community members that would otherwise have been great peer supporters.

Accreditation, on the other hand, can satisfy the need for quality assurance without changing the core attributes of peer support. Some of the benefits of accreditation are presented below.

Quality Improvement

By establishing organizational standards, accreditation ensures that programs are qualified and capable of delivering services. In this way, accreditation enhances the potential for quality assurance and quality improvement, which is often not emphasized in certification of individuals.

For instance, in a recent systematic review of the benefits, challenges, and trends in accreditation, 50% of the studies reviewed found accreditation to have a positive impact on the quality of services provided— most notably through patient satisfaction.

Establishing standards and measures provides an objective method of program evaluation that can highlight more evidence-based practices. Peers for Progress has identified four key functions of peer support that provide a useful template for developing programs that can be flexibly adapted to their settings and populations. Accreditation could use these functions as a basis for standardization and for ensuring the quality of services.

Organizational Capacity

Accreditation can increase the capacity of organizations to respond to community needs and strengthen its workforce development. For instance, in looking at the effect of accreditation on treatment centers, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) found that accredited treatment centers had lower staff turnover than non-accredited centers and were better able to define the scope of employees' roles. This could be helpful for peer support programs where ongoing organizational support, training, and supervision are essential for ensuring high quality services and retention of peer supporters.

Flexibility

One factor that differentiates accreditation and certification is the flexibility allowed in designating who is sanctioned to provide services. Certification requirements can exclude individuals that do not meet strict standards, such as having a minimum level of education. Accreditation, on the other hand, gives organizations the flexibility to train, employ, and supervise individuals who may or may not be recognized under certification guidelines. Peer supporters can be hired for volunteer, part-time, and full-time positions without delay.

Peer support is offered in diverse settings from individuals with various backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. Where certification requirements for individuals are restrictive, organizational standards that allow for flexibility in training and hiring may be more useful. Accreditation can also allow for the development of new and innovative financing models for peer support programs by paying for organizational activities and services that might otherwise not be reimbursable by individual peer supporters.

Legitimization

Beyond establishing standards, accreditation holds organizations accountable to the public and to their funders. In the process, it elevates the appreciation and reputation of accredited organizations. Not only does this increase public confidence, but it also highlights the quality and value of such services and encourages utilization. Within the

peer support field, accreditation could be used to [promote awareness of peer support](#) and enhance public perceptions of peer supporters and their services.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES WITH ACCREDITATION?

Accreditation does not come without challenges, some of which are discussed below.

Cost

Cost is one of the most cited challenges of accreditation. In the final months of preparation for accreditation, costs can become especially high, mostly because of personnel training and site preparation. However, there is some evidence to suggest that after accreditation has been achieved, costs may decrease over time, especially if continuous quality improvement is able to improve cost-effectiveness of service delivery.

Added Workload

Another common challenge is added workload. Accreditation requires organizations to establish, revise, and update policies and procedures. This can be particularly difficult for understaffed programs that may not have the human resource capacity to train individuals or prepare sites for accreditation. This factor has limited the ability of certain organizations to apply for accreditation.

Restrictive Standardization

Lastly, some organizations have found the standards imposed by accreditation to be restrictive. For instance, accreditation may not account for differences in environmental or cultural settings found among different organizations or populations. Accreditation standards need to be carefully developed to allow for cultural diversity.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACCREDITATION AND PEER SUPPORT

With new opportunities for peer support springing up in the Affordable Care Act, accreditation merits serious consideration as a vehicle to advance the field of peer support. Numerous benefits have been associated with accreditation, such as improvements in quality of services and organizational capacity, increased public confidence, and greater flexibility in hiring and training. New models for providing health care, such as the Patient Centered Medical Home or the Chronic Health Home could incorporate accredited peer support programs as a way of ensuring quality of care and ongoing support.

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Buetow, S. A., & Wellingham, J. (2003). Accreditation of general practices: challenges and lessons. Quality and Safety in Health Care;12(2):129-135. [[link](#)]

Burden, E., Hill, T., Zastowny, T. (2012). Developing an accreditation system for organizations and programs providing peer recovery support services (white paper). Faces and Voices of Recovery, Washington, D.C. [[link](#)]

Campbell, J., & Leaver, J. (2003, March). Emerging new practices in organized peer support. In Report from NTAC's National Experts Meeting on Emerging New Practices in Organized Peer Support March (pp. 17-18). [[link](#)]

Cerqueira, M. (2006). A literature review on the benefits, challenges and trends in accreditation as a quality assurance system. Victoria: British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development. [[link](#)]

Rush, C.H. (2012). Basics of Community Health Worker Credentialing. Retrieved 13 March 2014. [[link](#)]