

Executive Summary

Prehospital providers face routine exposure to trauma, critical incidents, moral injury, and cumulative stress. This occupational reality increases the risk of burnout, substance misuse, depression, post-traumatic stress, and suicide. Peer Support and resilience are crucial for mental health, particularly in high-stress occupations such as healthcare and emergency services (1).

This white paper outlines a structured framework for establishing, governing, and maintaining a Peer Support Team. It is designed for organizations seeking to implement peer support thoughtfully and in alignment with best practices without replacing clinical care or employee assistance programs.

When implemented effectively, peer support programs have been shown to improve engagement and retention in services, enhance recovery outcomes, and build supportive relationships that foster trust and resilience (2).

Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this white paper is to:

- Define what a Peer Support Team is
 - Outline core principles and ethical foundations
 - Provide a step-by-step framework for development and implementation
 - Identify governance, training, and risk-management considerations
 - Offer guidance on sustainability and program evaluation
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What Is a Peer Support Team?

A **Peer Support Team** is a structured group of trained personnel who provide confidential, non-clinical emotional and practical support to colleagues, drawing on shared experiences to promote resilience, coping, and overall psychological well-being (3).

Key Characteristics

- **Peer-based:** Support is provided by colleagues with shared lived experience.
 - **Voluntary:** Participation is never mandatory.
 - **Confidential:** Clear boundaries protect trust.
 - **Supportive, not clinical:** Peer supporters do not diagnose, treat, or counsel.
 - **Bridge to care:** Peer support encourages early help-seeking and referral when needed.
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What Peer Support Is Not

To maintain credibility and safety, it is critical to define limits:

Peer support **is not**:

- Therapy or clinical counseling
- A disciplinary or investigative function
- A substitute for mental health professionals
- A crisis intervention team acting independently of policy
- A “fix-it” solution for organizational dysfunction

Clear role definition is one of the most important risk-management steps in forming a team.

Step-by-Step Framework for Formation

1. Establish Organizational Commitment

Leadership and governing bodies must:

- Publicly endorse the program
- Allocate time, resources, and administrative support

- Affirm that peer support is wellness-focused, not punitive

Without visible leadership commitment, peer support programs often fail due to mistrust.

2. Define Governance and Oversight

A Peer Support Team should operate under:

- A written charter or policy
- Defined leadership (Team Lead or Coordinator)
- Oversight by a neutral entity (e.g., wellness committee, HR partner, nonprofit board)

Governance documents should address:

- Scope of practice
 - Confidentiality and exceptions
 - Documentation standards (if any)
 - Referral pathways
 - Liability considerations
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3. Select the Right Peer Supporters

Selection is more important than headcount.

Ideal peer supporters demonstrate:

- Emotional maturity and self-awareness
- Credibility and respect among peers
- Strong listening skills
- Ability to maintain boundaries
- Willingness to refer rather than rescue

Selection should involve:

- Application or nomination
 - Structured interviews
 - Diversity across roles, shifts, and backgrounds
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4. Provide Formal Training

All peer supporters should complete standardized training that includes:

- Active listening and communication skills
- Stress, trauma, and cumulative exposure
- Suicide awareness and safe referral
- Ethics and confidentiality
- Cultural competence
- Self-care and burnout prevention for peer supporters

Training should be:

- Evidence-informed
 - Recurrent
 - Documented for accountability
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5. Integrate Clinical and Community Resources

Peer Support Teams must have **clear pathways** to:

- Licensed mental health professionals
- Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)
- Crisis services
- Chaplaincy or spiritual care (when appropriate)

Formal relationships (MOUs or referral agreements) reduce hesitation during high-risk situations.

6. Communicate the Program Clearly

Successful programs invest in communication:

- What peer support is and is not
- How to access support
- Confidentiality boundaries
- Leadership endorsement

Messaging should normalize use of peer support as a sign of professional is not weakness.

Risk Management and Ethical Considerations

Key risk-management strategies include:

- Written confidentiality policies with legal review
- Clear escalation protocols for imminent risk
- No dual role conflicts (e.g., supervisors acting as peer supporters)
- Ongoing supervision or consultation for peer supporters
- Regular review of policies and practices

Ethical clarity protects both the peer supporter and the organization.

Sustainability and Program Health

Long-term success requires:

- Ongoing training and refresher courses
- Rotation or term limits to prevent burnout

- Recognition and support for peer supporters
- Data-informed evaluation (without violating confidentiality)

Metrics may include:

- Utilization trends (not names or cases)
 - Training completion rates
 - Workforce engagement or retention indicators
 - Qualitative feedback
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Conclusion

The evidence is clear; peer support is not optional; it is a critical component of a resilient and sustainable workforce. The cost of inaction is measurable in terms of burnout, turnover, diminished work performance, and most importantly, the well-being of the people who serve on the front lines every day (4).

1. **Rossouw, J. G., & Ruberto, M.** (2025). *Resilience first aid: Primary prevention through a strength-based peer support programme*. *Journal of Applied Neurosciences*, 4(1), Article a17.
2. **Eddie, D., et al.** (2025). *Peer Recovery Support Services and Recovery Coaching for Substance Use Disorder: A systematic Review*
3. International Association of Fire Fighters. (n.d.) *Behavioral health program: Peer support training manual*. IAFF.
4. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2017). *Value of peer support services in behavioral health care*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

