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Utilizing Peer Recovery Support Specialists (PRSSs) in Treatment Courts

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Introduction

Since the late 1980s, multidisciplinary teams of professionals from treatment courts have connected individuals experiencing substance use disorders (SUDs) with resources and services to sustain a lifestyle of recovery. One of the most recent additions to the treatment court team has been peer recovery support specialists (PRSSs). According to a national survey on PRSSs in adult drug treatment courts, 46.4% of programs reported having one or more PRSSs (van Womer et al., 2023). PRSSs are professionals who have their own personal experience overcoming SUDs or mental health issues, professional certifications, and are frequently graduates from the court program in which they work. There are many benefits of having PRSSs part of programs such as offering participants practical assistance, providing emotional and mental support, and serving as a role model (Gesser et al., 2022). As a result, many treatment courts are determining how to best utilize PRSSs in their programs.

With funding from the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) in 2025, Justice Initiatives at American University's School of Public Affairs conducted a series of focus groups with PRSSs to collect in-depth information about their experiences working in treatment courts. The focus group questions addressed PRSSs' perspectives on their successes, challenges, satisfaction, experiences, and how treatment court professionals can better integrate their role into the treatment court setting.

After an open call for participation in the project, three courts were selected to participate in this initiative. Each focus group was hosted virtually on Zoom for about an hour with an experienced facilitator and the PRSSs.

The findings from the focus group were categorized into the following areas:

- Motivation to Become a PRSS
- Positive Job Experiences
- Areas for Improvement
- Navigating Trust
- Job Satisfaction
- Needed Resources

Motivation to Become a PRSS

Focus group participants were asked what motivated them to become a PRSS. Several PRSSs reported that their personal experiences dealing with a family member who had a SUD led them to a path of working as a PRSS. Most of the PRSS shared that having compassion and wanting to help others on their recovery journey was a motivator to obtain a PRSS role. For example, it was stated that often PRSSs received a lot of support and help on their recovery journey, and they wanted to give back and assist others who were going through what they experienced. One respondent was inspired by the opportunity to offer participants a second chance and to let them know that they can live a life outside of engaging in substance use.

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In addition, the PRSSs have been through the recovery process and felt equipped that they could model what successful recovery looks like.

> *While I was in my recovery and started getting professional treatment and stuff, I had met a person and she was probably one of the most helpful people for me in my recovery. So, it definitely inspired me. And at that time, I didn't know that having a past with addiction and mental health, that there was a space to do something like this. So, it definitely was motivating and also inspiring for me.*

Positive Job Experiences

Respondents described aspects of their experiences as a PRSS that were going well. The ability to interact with participants and connect them to resources (e.g., treatment and supportive services) or to watch them accomplish milestones was rewarding for the PRSSs to witness. One of the PRSSs mentioned that the responsibility to be a role model to the participants helped them remain sober, because they have a duty to show that recovery from addiction is possible. It was noted PRSSs' lived experience was a strength, because it helped participants relate to them and build camaraderie. Peer support is mutual because the PRSS and participants both benefit from their interactions with each other. The PRSSs also acknowledged the support that they receive from one another as a strength of the job.

In regard to professional development, the PRSSs were pleased with the various training opportunities offered by the court or external agencies, because they gained skills that could be utilized in their work with participants.

> *I love to interact with them (participants) and see how they are doing. Especially when they hit that milestone of another certificate, like, another 30 or 60 days in their recovery. Of course, because I know I've been there, and that's a great milestone for them as well. You know, trying to get them to where they need to be in life. Them just succeeding, it's awesome.*

Areas for Improvement

On the other hand, participants were asked several questions about areas of improvement regarding the PRSS role. Several PRSSs felt that a lack of job security was an issue since some of their positions are grant-funded, so if a grant is lost, then the job may cease to exist. It was also expressed that there is a desire for the PRSSs to be viewed as professionals just like other court team members. Several of the PRSSs served programs that they were graduates from, and they stated that some of the team members still viewed them as participants instead of colleagues. Multiple PRSSs claimed that experiencing burnout can be a reality in this occupation due to the workload. It was also expressed that sometimes participants are not fully engaged with treatment, so that can be frustrating to work through. The PRSSs realize the benefits that treatment services play in a successful recovery and want participants to be fully committed to treatment engagement. PRSSs believe that they could benefit from receiving more communication and updates from team members about participants' progress in the program. The PRSSs also shared that they have valuable information and that they could advocate for their participants such as speaking up for them so that they can get the supportive services that they need.

> *I would say burnout. You know, just from taking care of people, working hard every day, and just getting that sense of fatigue. I would also say that when you are supporting people and you're giving your 100% and you feel like it's not being reciprocated by the people that you're working with. You know, you want what's good for them, but they don't latch on and that can be frustrating.*

Navigating Trust

Respondents commented on difficult situations that involved navigating trust between participants and PRSSs. Many of the PRSSs reported that when a participant returns to substance use, they are required to share that information with the team. During

a particular incident, a participant was having suicidal ideations, and the PRSS immediately connected them to the clinical team. The PRSSs felt since they were mandated reporters that they needed to bring this issue to the clinicians for a solution to be implemented. These situations highlight the importance of operating strategically around sensitive topics, because the PRSSs don't want to lose the trust or damage the rapport that they have with participants. One PRSS reported that often it can be a battle to get participants to fully trust the team and convince them that the staff is there to help.

> *I'm not here to judge or anything, but I would rather for you to let me know. Don't tell me everything is always going well. If a mistake or something happens, I'd rather know that. That gives us something to work on.*

Job Satisfaction

Each focus group respondent was asked to discuss to what extent they were satisfied with their job and to explain why. Most of the PRSSs indicated that overall they were pleased with serving as a PRSS. They were satisfied with aspects such as flexibility regarding work hours if they have an outside commitment they need to attend, not being micromanaged, and the support received from supervisors and fellow PRSSs. Several PRSSs reported being content because they have the ability to help others recover, and that being a PRSS gave them a purpose, which was to help move people from addiction to recovery. However, the PRSSs mentioned that there was room for improvement. For instance, better compensation, a finding consistent with other research on peer recovery specialists (see Alavi et al., 2024) or the need for more selfcare opportunities during the workday due to the demanding nature of the job was voiced by some PRSSs.

> *I'm satisfied because I get to help. I get to give back what was freely given to me. I understand the people coming in. I see where they're coming in as, and I don't want to go back there. And I want them to get to the point where they are better in their recovery.*

Needed Resources

The PRSSs were asked what they needed to effectively serve as a PRSS. Several PRSSs discussed the desire to have scheduled check-ins with some of the court team members (e.g., clinical staff and coordinator) to receive and provide updates on participants. None of the PRSSs in this project attended team staffings.

Additionally, the need for more funding to organize prosocial activities (e.g., playing sports) in the community to build rapport with participants. There were also external needs that were raised during the focus groups. For example, having more inpatient facilities for participants was acknowledged as a need. It was also mentioned that more housing options in general for participants, both currently in treatment and program graduates is needed. It was reported that many participants leave a treatment facility, and they go back to an old environment where they were around people using drugs, so it may not be in the best interest for some participants to return to their former housing accommodations. The need for more transportation resources (e.g., company vehicles) was noted as a concern. Some PRSSs serve multiple counties, which covers a large geographical area, and coordinating transportation can be a challenge.

> *I think everyone can agree, people, places, and things are a big part of the recovery aspect. You know you can't hang around the same people and be at the same places and do the same things. We need reasonable housing for people going through the recovery process. People need some security to get out of their environment.*

Conclusions and Recommendations

Several themes emerged from the focus groups with PRSSs. Many of the PRSSs expressed their desire to help participants on their recovery journey. Being a PRSS is a rewarding role because they can witness the successes and milestones that participants accomplish as they progress through the treatment court program. However, there were concerns about experiencing burnout, job security, better compensation, or not being viewed as professionals. The PRSSs identified needs such as having structured check-ins with team members, more transportation options (e.g. access to company vehicles), or funding to host prosocial activities for participants. There were several external needs, such as safer and secure housing and treatment facilities for participants. Below are a few recommendations.

Recommendation 1

Apply Current Research and Best Practices on Peers to the Treatment Court

Apply practices from the Adult Treatment Court Best Practice Standards (All Rise, 2026) and Incorporating Peer Recovery Support into Treatment Courts: Practice Guidelines for Treatment Court Professionals (Kunkel & van Wormer, 2023) into treatment court operations.

Recommendation 2

Continue the Professionalization of the PRSS Role

In the PRSS field, there are national or regional organizations that offer education and training opportunities for peer recovery support specialists. However, more organizations should develop tailored training and technical assistance (TTA) opportunities for PRSSs who work treatment courts. As the professionalization of PRSSs continues, ensure that there aren't unintended consequences such as a loss of connection between participants and PRSSs. Our team at American University (AU) has developed training sessions and works with PRSSs serving treatment courts.

Recommendation 3

Fund PRSSs to Support Treatment Courts

There is a lot of growth happening in the PRSSs space in treatment courts. As a result, there needs to be funding allocated to hire and competitively pay PRSSs, to develop resources to support their job duties, to create training sessions, to conduct research, and to develop policy. Funders like the federal government, state agencies, foundations, and the private sector can play a huge role in supporting PRSSs' advancement.

References

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