

Role of the Peer Support Specialist

Summarized by Thomas T. Thomas

The Peer Support Specialist (PSS) is a relatively new role in Alameda County and is awarded to an individual with lived experience in areas of mental health and substance abuse. Having faced and moved on from those challenges and with comprehensive training, the PSS helps others face similar challenges. At our July 22 informational meeting, we heard from **Ivan Ayebale**, Assistant Director—and now Interim Program Director—of the Family Education and Resource Center ([FERC](#)),¹ who is himself a PSS. Along with FERC Family Navigator **Armondo DePina**, he gave us an update on the training required and the role PSSs are taking on in the county.

“I’m here as a professional, a family member, and a peer,” Ayebale said, “so the work is deeply personal to me.” FERC supports families impacted by mental health and substance abuse issues. It provides education and navigation for families, support groups, connection between people and county resources, and crisis management and support.

“It’s not just what we do,” he said, “but how we do it.” FERC hires people with lived experience, either a family member caring for someone with a mental health or substance issue or a person doing their own recovery. “But they have done enough healing to be able to help someone else.”

Training for the PSS role, Ayebale said, teaches ethics, boundaries, recovery principles, a culture of humility, communication skills, and empowerment, with hope as a key principle. “Getting the certificate does not replace your story,” he said, “but it teaches you to tell your story responsibly.” With this training, the peer can help other people understand their own situation and minimize isolation. The peer can make it easier to understand the available services and how to use them.

With Ayebale’s background in both clinical and PSS training, he noted that clinical services are important and play a role that the peer support specialist cannot fill. And medication is a part of that, too. “But healing doesn’t all happen inside an office. It helps to have someone saying, ‘I understand you, and you are not alone.’”

The approach makes a person think about his or her own way. “The PSS walks beside you, not ahead of or behind you, and they don’t walk for you. They sit down and listen and help you discover you can walk on your own.” They also show that every family story is different, not “my story is your story” but “I can understand.”

Then Armondo DePina told his own story. It started when he was 14 and his parents were divorced. He went into a group home, got into trouble, was sent to John George Psychiatric Pavilion, and then to prison. His younger brother had mental health issues, and DePina was determined to help him and turned himself around.

¹ Over the past months, FERC has faced funding issues, and the organization had been told it would be closed at the end of the fiscal year. Many staff departed. But then the county restored funding for perhaps another year. Some staff have returned and new staff were hired. So, it is a continuing story.

The Mental Health Association of Alameda County hired DePina as a family advocate based on his background. He became a PSS and has been at FERC for two years. His goal is helping people navigate on their own and getting family members into peer support training.

“PSS training teaches you about communication and self-disclosure—what to disclose and how much, in pieces, and minimally,” he said. “The role is based on relationship, dialogue, and weekly calls. It’s navigating approaches. It’s coaching.”

The PSS training is offered by the [California Association of Peer Supporters \(CAPS\) Academy](#). A NAMI member who took the training to better understand her loved one said that it fits with NAMI’s goal of “being the hope for those who have lost their hope.” You work with the person rather than doing things for them. You don’t refer to the person by their illness but as who they are, approaching their strengths. And you remember that recovery is not a straight line. The training is useful for anyone taking care of a loved one with mental illness or substance abuse.

The training itself requires 80 hours of online classroom engagement—taken either during the day or evening—for four days a week. At the end is an online examination leading to certification. The course and examination fees may be paid by a scholarship from a local agency or by application with the state NAMI.

“This training has changed everything about mental health support,” Aye bale said. “You’re not just waiting for a crisis but stepping in to help before it happens.”

The course also teaches you self-care training and, in the case of substance abuse, harm reduction versus abstinence. It involves interacting with other participants at all levels of recovery. And at the end, CAPS can help the certified PSS get a job.

Potential roles for the peer support specialist include organizations working with mental illness and substance abuse, senior centers, women’s shelters and organizations dealing with abuse, and really anywhere you interact with people who need services. CAPS certification holders can also do MediCal billing and take subsequent courses, such as for the justice involved.

The certification exam is based on the graduate’s understanding of the principles taught and not just facts. It invites the student to think about their own experiences rather than trying to solve other people’s problems. You try to understand about where they are, based on trauma-informed care.

“But you’re not just using your own lived experience to take over their experience,” Aye bale said. “It’s a culture of humility.”