

How Do Substance Use Disorder Peer Support Specialist Credentialing Requirements Vary Across States?

The Public Health Problem

Substance use disorder (SUD) is a pressing public health concern that remains undertreated. More than 80,000 people died from a drug overdose in 2024. Only 19.3% of people aged 12 or older with SUD received treatment that year. And 38.9% of people with unmet SUD treatment needs did not know how or where to access care.

Background

Credentialed peer support specialists (PSS) provide nonclinical, recovery-oriented support to improve engagement and access to treatment by offering mentoring, linkage to services and community resources, motivational support, and assistance navigating systems of care.

While states share common PSS certification components, such as minimum education level, age, and examination requirements, there is considerable variation in both the expectations and the accessibility of credentialing information, particularly regarding criminal background checks.

What This Article Addresses

As of September 2024, 40 state Medicaid programs covered SUD peer support services delivered by credentialed PSS, but no comprehensive analysis of state variation in credentialing requirements has been conducted.

Understanding state-level variation impacts PSS workforce development, scope and quality of services delivered.

What They Did (Methods)

The authors conducted a systematic state-level mapping of PSS credentialing requirements from September 2024 to December 2025 using publicly available information from Medicaid and state websites, provider manuals, handbooks, and certification forms.

What They Discovered (Findings)



Shared foundations: States shared core PSS certification components (e.g., training, exams, lived experience).



Transparency and requirements vary widely: States differ substantially in expectations and accessibility of information, particularly regarding criminal background check policies.



Multiple credentialing pathways exist: While most states use a single certification model, five states offered a tiered PSS credentialing model with progressive requirements and opportunities for specialization.

Opportunities for Action

The study findings highlight opportunities for:

Health care leaders & providers

- Review PSS requirements and training to support workforce development.
- Strengthen peer support services to improve patient engagement.
- Leverage peer support to reduce stigma and connect patients to care.

Policymakers & payors

- Review state credentialing requirements with PSS input to identify opportunities for improvement and alignment.
- Improve accessibility and transparency of requirements (including criminal background checks).
- Reduce financial barriers by minimizing certification costs.
- Consider role advancement opportunities for PSS.

Researchers

- Evaluate how differences in credentialing impact scope and quality of care, workforce development, and patient outcomes.
- Examine best practices, including tiered certification models, to inform standards.

Patients & families

- Seek peer support services as a resource for navigating treatment and recovery.
- Advocate for access to peer support programs in your communities.
- Request clearer information about available services.