

Recommendations for Implementing Human Trafficking Peer Support within the Justice System

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As the utilization of peer support for trafficking survivors continues to become more popular, there is a learning curve when implementing this incredibly vital role in a multidisciplinary team. CATCH Court (Changing Actions to Change Habits), of Franklin County in Columbus, Ohio, is a specialized docket certified by the Supreme Court of Ohio. Founded in 2009, CATCH has been a trailblazer in restorative, trauma-informed responses to prostitution-related offenses and human trafficking in the criminal legal system. In collaboration with the Center for Justice Innovation, in 2020, CATCH hired a certified peer support advocate

with lived experience in prostitution, trafficking, and addiction to provide ongoing mentorship, support, and guidance to the female litigants in the CATCH Court program.supportive way.¹

Having a trafficking survivor on staff has made a remarkable contribution to successful intervention with the women in the program. It has provided a vivid and tangible example of hope and healing, a resource to assist with navigating challenging societal and criminal legal systems, and a coach to support the development and utilization of the healthy coping skills needed to maintain recovery. However, over the three-year period of collaboration with our dedicated peer support advocate, there have been many areas of significant growth and learning. This document will highlight the CATCH Court team's discoveries and recommendations for successfully implementing the role of a peer support advocate within a court-based program.

Here are our suggestions for effective design and implementation of the trafficking peer advocate role:

Hiring and onboarding: Hiring in this role can feel daunting and overwhelming as there is much to consider during the selection and onboarding process for this vital role. Due to the nature of the work, we would recommend someone who has a minimum time in recovery and/or has someone who has exited from *the life*. That minimum can be determined by jurisdiction, however, since CATCH Court is a two-year program, we required a minimum of two years of recovery to be eligible. Additional requirements may include being a certified peer support advocate or being willing to obtain certification and previous participation within a specialized docket program.

In addition, we recommend the peer position come with a benefits package and a salary that reflects a living wage (this may vary by

location). Hiring advocates through a contract position prevents them from having access to much needed benefits like medical insurance. If possible, they should be hired through the court as an employee and offered the same benefits as other court employees. It is also recommended that a part of their benefits package come with a self-care stipend within each pay period, which can be used at their discretion, as well as a budget to fund continued professional growth (i.e., conference costs, licensure application or testing fees, tuition reimbursement).

Frequent and structured check-ins: We recommend weekly documented meetings between the peer advocate and their supervisor. The supervisor should hold clinical licensure or have significant clinical experience and utilize trauma-informed supervision strategies to check for, prevent, and address vicarious trauma, and inform the peer advocate about employee assistance programs and support. These meetings may be tailored to specific projects but should include a review of the peer's current work week and plans and goals for the coming week, challenges and highlights of the client work, work schedule review and approval, and time for any questions, concerns, or suggestions. Having ongoing collaboration and check-ins with the peer is a vital support that will help them troubleshoot tough situations, ensure practices and interactions with participants remain ethical and effective, and promote open lines of communication. This offers the opportunity for clear responses, directives, and additional support and resources from leadership when peer advocates are struggling, as well as reciprocal feedback between the peer advocate and supervisor. In addition, it provides space for the supervisor to learn from the peer in order to ensure programmatic structures and processes sufficiently address any needs or barriers clients in the docket may be experiencing.

Foundational training: Boundaries, self-care, time management, vicarious trauma and burnout prevention, and balancing the demands of the job with the demands of clients are all

areas that can be particularly challenging for peer advocates. Because of their lived experience of trafficking victimization, peer advocates are at high risk for developing secondary trauma as well as being retraumatized through their daily work responsibilities. Requiring peers to complete training specifically on peer support advocacy and/or general professional development is recommended prior to engaging in this work. This includes but is not limited to trainings around trauma-informed care, ethics, effective communication, de-escalation training, suicide prevention and identification, collaborative problem-solving, and cultural humility. Without the proper tools and support to navigate these areas, there is great potential for the peer advocate to struggle with work-related mental health issues that could progress to job performance issues. Learning how to manage the challenging aspects of the position is often something that can only occur while doing the work and therefore must be addressed and supported in an ongoing manner.

Finally, it is essential for the peer support advocate to be knowledgeable about the local resources that are available to assist in supporting the clients. It is recommended that they spend time in the community meeting with agencies that work with substance use, mental health, detox, job readiness/workforce development, etc., to learn about the services provided at local treatment agencies and organizations as well as referral processes.

Semi-structured schedule: While it is understood that there will likely be variations to the peer advocate's schedule based on client needs and crises that arise, having a semi-set schedule is helpful for staying on track, promoting prioritization of needs, setting boundaries, and preventing burnout. The desire to always be available and responsive will likely be present for the peer advocate, especially after rapport has been established between the peer advocate and their clients. Encouraging a consistent schedule and supporting peer advocates in not responding to clients outside of their scheduled working hours can be extremely

helpful in keeping healthy boundaries and a professional ethic.

Inclusion and empowerment: The voice of the peer advocate should be included as much as possible in conversations and spaces where programmatic decisions are made. There is no greater resource to a practitioner in service to survivors than an individual who has lived similar experiences and is on the other side. The peer advocate is an incredible asset to help inform the intentionality of the program, ensure the survivor perspective is taken into consideration at all stages of program development and evaluation, and decrease the likelihood that practitioners unintentionally cause harm to survivors. The peer advocate's voice must carry significant weight! Albeit not the focus of this document, the creation of an advisory board can further enhance program development and allows for deeper inclusion and empowerment. Programs must recognize the importance of including a diverse perspective of survivors from BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and immigrant communities to inform the work.

Even with navigating challenges when hiring a peer advocate, the benefits significantly outweigh any difficulties that may present. With the presence of the CATCH Court peer advocate, we saw an increase in survivor engagement, a greater rate of clients returning to substance use treatment or detox after a relapse, and an immense picture of hope for newcomers in the program.

" I know that when I mess up, or when I'm struggling, I can call her, and she will give me the words I need to hear. She has been where I am and that is the most comforting thing because she is speaking what she knows, and she made it out. And she carries our voice. She advocates for what is best for us with the court team and our treatment providers. I mean court staff and counselors are great, but she gets us on a level that professionals will never understand, no matter how long they do this work."

—CATCH Court Participant

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1. For more information on training for peer advocates, please see these resources: <https://www.samhsa.gov/about-us/who-we-are/offices-centers/or/model-standards> and <https://mha.ohio.gov/community-partners/peer-supporters>.