

Role of a Peer Support Program

The goal of a peer support program is to develop a support structure to assist workers who are going through the difficult transition period of rapid change and uncertainty that follows job loss.

Peers serve as a bridge connecting workers to dislocated worker program services through outreach, recruitment, and on-going program follow-up.

Peers are experts on the specific conditions in the workplace, how to effectively identify the needs of co-workers, and ways to meet these needs.

Peers also play a vital role in planning, developing service delivery systems, and in providing on-going feedback on program effectiveness. Their knowledge of the workplace and the feedback they can provide allow the modification of services to make them more effective. Throughout the program, from design through implementation, peer support staff plays a critical role in linking their co-workers with Department of Labor and Workforce Development staff, service providers and the union.

While peer support staff has a major role to play in helping people deal with the layoff experience, it is also important to recognize the limits of their role. They are not professional service providers, therapists, or social workers. They are the paraprofessional support staff that makes the work of the professional staff more effective.

Peer support staff serves as a comfortable connection between workers and the dislocated worker program that helps to demystify and maximize the use of services. They are a source of program information, a friendly face, and a friendly ear in a difficult time. On the personal level they are able to validate what people are feeling, break down isolation, help people initiate the planning process and help overcome resistance to retraining/reemployment opportunities.

Peer support activities may include

- doing program outreach
- acting as a rumor-control center
- facilitating program readiness
- facilitating workshops and groups
- acting as a referral source to community agencies
- helping workers understand the impact of dislocation
- helping workers deal with denial
- affirming the basic strength and dignity of co-workers
- validating feelings
- assist in problem solving
- helping people make the transition through the change cycle

- acting as an advocate for the worker
- acting as a program liaison and monitoring progress
- providing social support
- early intervention and prevention
- providing clear and accurate program information
- advising workers on how to access services

Peers are helpers and facilitators. They are able to take service one step further.

Effective Peers

Peers are useful in contacting laid-off workers and setting up appointments, but their real value is dealing with workers who have a hard time using program services effectively.

Dealing with these workers may take more time than professional staff has available. Through personal contact, advocacy, and support, peers make sure these workers don't fall through the cracks.

This leaves professional staff available to work with those participants who are ready to move into training or into job search. In this model, peer support staff use their expertise and knowledge as part of the service delivery team.

Job Loss -

When a worker loses their job, they lose much more than just a paycheck. They lose:

- Their work family
- Identity- especially if they are the bread winner.
- Self worth
- Independence
- Money
- Health care/insurance
- Status
- Quality of life
- Future plans
- American dream
- Trust
- Control

Change Process- Stages of Loss

<p>DENIAL -No- 1</p>	<p>ACCEPTANCE -Yeah- 4</p>
<p>2 RESISTANCE -Yeah, but-</p>	<p>3 EXPLORATION -Maybe-</p>

- During stage one the worker does not trust.
- Trust begins at stage three.
- It is not possible to jump from box one to box four. Everyone must go through the process.
- Some individuals take hours to go through the process, some take weeks, months, or years to move through the process.
- Many people move back and forth through the stages.

People at stages three and four are “ready” to hear and process the information provided in worker informational meetings.

Peers help workers move from stage one to stage three.

Peers are:

A friendly face, a source of social support, they take the time to talk to their co-workers, ask what they think and how they feel.

Empathetic and are care takers.

Familiar with benefits structure, they are able to act as a bridge between their co-workers and services.

Objective of a peer project

To make sure no one falls through the cracks.

To prepare people to get a new job- every aspect.

Pre-Layoff

Initiating a peer program one to six months prior to the layoff is ideal. A pre-layoff program is the most effective in preventing problems from developing and in helping to move affected workers to be ready to use services in the timeliest way.

A good pre-layoff program can get understandable information to every worker before a layoff, can help them move through the denial and anger while they still have their work family for support and can help workers develop education plans before a layoff.

In a pre-layoff situation peers use their break time and lunch time to meet with the other workers. The affect on daily operations should be minimal and actually increase productivity if the workers feel that they can rely on someone to help answer their questions and provide information. There is usually one peer for every 50 workers. Peer for each shift, each demographic.

Post layoff

The peers are paid through a contractor or union to continue their peer work and may be employed for up to two years after the closure.

How to choose a peer

Management usually selects salary people and union selects hourly people. Peers are peers to those in similar job classifications and level, such as supervisors are peers to supervisors, office workers to office workers, operators to operators, etc.

Another method would be to have the workers nominate individuals, or request volunteers and have management, union and rapid response interview and make the final selection.

The most important guideline in choosing effective peer support staff is to find the people who are the natural helpers in the workplace, the people that co-workers turn to for support in the daily routine of work. These natural helpers exist in every workplace and in most departments. Sometimes they may be shop stewards, union officers, or staff personnel. Often they are those workers who show empathy for other people, who listen well and who are willing to take an extra step to help.

Some of the characteristics to look for are people:

- who care about others
- are respected and trusted
- show empathy and compassion
- listen actively
- accept people with different opinions and values

People that are not cut out for a peer role are individuals that:

- always think they are right
- feel that they have that answer for everyone
- judge other people
- advise, tell, or direct others

The key is to select people that are the “natural peers”. The people that people already go to for advice or support.

Peer training

Peers not expected to become peer without training. Three days of professional training on the role of a peer, the psychological response to change, identifying what is needed by individuals and families, listening skills, and communication skills is provided by a trained peer expert.