

## Integrating SOAR with Peer Certifications

ENHANCING WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPROVING SOAR IMPLEMENTATION

Peer operated services are recognized nationally and internationally as an effective service that promotes positive recovery-based outcomes for individuals with behavioral health conditions. Peer specialists have the capacity to help others as they have an understanding from shared life experiences. SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery (SOAR) trained peer workers can play a vital role in increasing agency capacity to serve more applicants, provide support to existing SOAR trained staff, and improve quality of applications. This document is designed to provide guidance on collaborating with state Peer Specialist Certification Boards to develop infrastructure that integrates SOAR within the certification process.

### The Importance of Peer Supports

Peer support workers provide services in a range of settings, including peer-run organizations, recovery community centers and residences, legal settings, hospitals, child welfare agencies, homeless shelters, and behavioral health and primary care settings. Peer support can be provided by adults, youth, and family members and can encompass several roles including support staff, case management staff, data collectors/evaluators, and community health workers. The role of a peer support worker complements that of therapists, case managers, and other members of a treatment team by sharing vital experiential information and real examples of the power of recovery to help support an individual's recovery. Helping people navigate and access the life-saving public benefits and services aligns with the peer role as support in a wide variety of settings and can potentially help improve other system performance measures for the organization (e.g., increased income to obtain and maintain affordable housing, increased access to health insurance to maintain treatment, reduced hospitalizations, etc.).

Many peer support workers currently provide education about benefits and assistance ranging from Social Security Administration (SSA) supports (Supplemental Security Income/Social Security Disability Insurance (SSI/SSDI)) and Medicaid and Medicare, to emergency energy assistance.

### Development of the Peer Workforce

- States offer Peer Specialist Certification programs to ensure that peers providing services are adequately trained. This also allows peer support services to be reimbursed through various funding sources, including Medicaid. As with other professional certifications, there is training, testing, and continuing education credits that must be obtained for individuals to retain their certification. The requirements for certifying peer support specialists vary by state, and certification bodies range from state government entities to independent non-profit organizations. Find your specific state requirements using the [Doors to Wellbeing: State Specific Peer Specialist Certification Database](#).

As the number of peer support specialists increases, it is important to consider the positive impact that SOAR certification could have in increasing access to SOAR services. While basic peer certification lays the groundwork

for peer support roles, opportunities to participate in advanced trainings such as the SOAR Online Course could provide peer workers opportunities to acquire additional valuable skills and knowledge. According to a [2015 national survey](#) on compensation among peer specialists, the average reported wage was \$15.42/hour. The hands-on approach of the SOAR process allows the peer worker to gain advanced writing and computer skills as well as an in-depth knowledge of SSA's disability determination process. The acquisition of these skills contributes to increased marketability of the peer worker but also expands available services offered by the employing agency. It should be noted however, that not all peer support roles are best suited for SOAR work, thus it is recommended that organizations review the [Hiring and Supervising SOAR Case Workers Toolkit](#) for more information about the specialized elements of SOAR positions and the importance of pay equity.

## Initiating Conversations: Integrating SOAR into Peer Work

### Know Your Ask

Given the wide range and diversity of peer work, it is important to “know your ask” when initiating conversations around integrating peers into SOAR work. It may be helpful to consider questions such as:

- What roles can peer workers hold within your SOAR initiative/local community/state?
- How can the other entity (e.g., peer specialist certification board, local CoC, clinic, etc.) directly help you accomplish that goal?
- What problem are you looking to address, (e.g., lack of staff capacity to complete SOAR applications, underutilization of SOAR in your community/state, underdevelopment of the peer workforce in your community/state, sense of shame or overwhelm experienced by individuals seeking SSI/SSDI, etc.)?

### Know Your Target Audience

- Be selective and targeted about who you ask. It is more effective to focus on a small number of entities who are well-equipped to answer your query rather than a large number who are not in the necessary decision-making positions.
- Prior to reaching out, utilize the [Doors to Wellbeing: State Specific Peer Specialist Certification Database](#) to obtain contact information for the state certifying body and/or contact information for the Peer training provider/vendor (if applicable).

### Be Clear and Prepared

- Be clear about what you will need them to do to fulfill the request.
- Outline how much time, energy, money, or commitment you think it will take. Share the [Getting Involved with SOAR](#) resource.
- Put the ask up front and reiterate at the close of the meeting. This could be in the form of an action statement/item, (e.g., scheduling a follow-up call or meeting, asking to create a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), obtaining contact information for another key stakeholder, etc.).

## Certification Integration Options

Here are some examples of how states have been able to integrate the SOAR Online Course into the Peer Certification process.

### Required Learning

Peer certification processes in all 50 states, and Washington, DC require applicants to complete an initial training, sometimes referred to as “core training.” The curricula vary by state or training vendor, its purpose is to convey the skills and competencies that peer support specialists need to enter the human service field. Topics covered typically include ethics, sharing the recovery story, person-centered planning, and communication skills. While it would be impractical for states to require SOAR training for the initial peer certification, some states have been successful in incorporating overviews of SOAR within their initial training curriculums.



For many years, Georgia’s 2-week Certified Peer Specialist (CPS) training devoted time to a SOAR orientation (discussing the purpose of SOAR, target demographics served, and introducing the SOAR process and critical components). Once peer specialists obtained their Peer Specialist certification, they were invited to complete SOAR training to satisfy their continuing education requirements. Currently, Georgia CPSs can submit the SOAR Online Course for their CEU requirements.

### Continuing Education

Most of the state endorsed peer certification processes require certified peer specialists to meet annual continuing education requirements which can range from a few hours per year to 36 hours every 2 years (check the database for your state specific requirements). Requiring continuing education ensures continuous competence in the field of peer support or provides specialized training, such as training for working with specific populations or incorporating additional skill sets.



In the state of Louisiana, a minimum of 10 Continuing Education Credits per year is required. Their Peer Certifying body accepts the SOAR Online Course as relevant training and awards continuing education credits for a full period of two years for peer support specialists who complete the course.

### Specialist Endorsement on Certification

An endorsement is a continuing education training that is available to peer specialists once they are certified. Specialist endorsements are an option for peers who have completed trainings such as the SOAR Online Course that enable them to help people more effectively in their recovery. These endorsements can provide a peer support specialist with unique job opportunities and open the door to career advancement.



In Illinois, Certified Recovery Support Specialists (CRSS) can apply for and add an Employment Endorsement to demonstrate that they have received specialized training on supported employment skills. [Read more about the model.](#)

## Recommended Resources

### SOAR Implementation Resources

- [SAMHSA SOAR TA Center](#): The SAMHSA SOAR TA Center provides training and technical assistance to help states and communities develop implementation plans for SOAR and track outcomes. Each state has a designated TA Center liaison who can provide further guidance on Peer Supports in your state and can assist in the preparation of meetings with Peer Specialist Certifying bodies.
- [SOAR Overview](#): This document provides an overview of the SOAR model, strategies for implementation, and a review of annual outcomes. The overview can be provided to potential stakeholders (such as Peer Specialist Certifying bodies) for educational and strategic planning purposes.
- [SOAR National Outcomes](#): Infographics for annual and cumulative outcomes for SOAR-assisted applications. Data collected from states and communities implementing the SOAR model provide evidence that SOAR Works!
- [Steps to Completing SSI/SSDI Applications using the SOAR Model](#): This is a step-by-step guide of how to complete and submit an SSI/SSDI application using the SOAR model.
- [Hiring and Supervising SOAR Case Workers - A Toolkit for Workers and Leads](#): This toolkit provides helpful suggestions and key considerations when hiring and supervising SOAR case workers. Tools include helpful considerations for posting positions, the interview process, and unique ways to evaluate a candidate's key competencies.

### Peer Support Resources

- [Doors to Wellbeing: State Specific Peer Specialist Certification Database](#): This searchable database allows the user to obtain state-specific information on the eligibility criteria and process for Peer Specialist Certification, as well as contact information for each state's Peer Specialist certifying body and lead agency (if applicable).
- [Peer Support Workers and Peer-Run Organizations - A Beneficial Resource for Implementing SOAR](#): This issue brief developed by the SAMHSA SOAR TA Center explores how peers are a natural fit to help people with the SSI/SSDI application process using SOAR.
- [SAMHSA Peer Recovery Center of Excellence](#): The SAMHSA Peer Recovery Center of Excellence is a resource for individuals, organizations, and systems. Their work areas include integration of peers in non-traditional settings, recovery community organization (RCO) capacity building, peer workforce development and evidence-based practice dissemination.
- [National Association of Peer Supporters \(N.A.P.S.\)](#): A professional and educational organization that is dedicated to the growth and enhancement of the Peer Support profession. The organization sponsors an annual peer support professional conference, live webinars, and continuing education opportunities.
- [Mental Health America – Center for Peer Support](#): Mental Health America has developed the first national advanced peer specialist certification. Their Center for Peer Support offers further information on credentialing and opportunities for continuing education.

## Youth

- [Youth MOVE National](#): Youth MOVE National is a chapter-based organization that works to amplify and encourage the voices of youth with lived experience in mental health, juvenile justice, education, and child welfare systems.
- [Youth MOVE Peer Center](#): The Youth MOVE Peer Center is a SAMHSA funded Consumer Run and Consumer Supporter Technical Assistance Center funded to provide direct technical assistance, learning communities, product development, and training to increase the capacity of the mental health field to implement and integrate youth peer services.

## Families

- [Family Run Executive Director Leadership Association \(FREDLA\)](#): FREDLA provides support and advocacy for family-run organizations through training and technical assistance. They encourage collaboration and peer-to-peer sharing among family-run organizations.
- [National Family Support Technical Assistance Center \(NFSTAC\)](#): NFSTAC is a SAMHSA funded Center of Excellence that supports families and caregivers of children with serious mental illness and/or substance use challenges. They work to build partnerships between families and providers.
- [National Family Peer Specialist Certification](#): The National Federation of Families provides a National Certification for Family Peer Specialists (CFPS).

## Veterans

- [Veterans Affairs \(VA\) peer specialists](#): VA peer specialists and peer support apprentices help fellow Veterans navigate the VA system.