



**An Ghníomhaireacht
Tithíochta**
The Housing Agency

Peer Support Specialist Toolkit

Integration and delivery of peer
support specialist services

Tithíocht ar dTús
Oifig Náisiúnta
Housing First
National Office

The Peer Support Specialist Toolkit was developed in support with:



Principles of Housing First

* A Housing First Manual for Ireland, Dr. Sam Tsemberis

1. Consumer Choice
2. Separation of Housing & Services
3. Matching Services to Tenant Needs
4. Recovery - Focused Service
5. Social Inclusion & Scattered Site Housing

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A photograph of a courtyard between buildings. The central focus is a wall made of rough-hewn stone blocks. A single window with a dark frame is set into this wall. Above the window, the wall transitions to a smoother, possibly brick or plastered surface. To the left, a modern building with large glass windows and a dark frame is visible. To the right, a plain, light-colored wall is partially seen. The ground is paved with light-colored tiles. The overall lighting is soft, suggesting an overcast day or late afternoon. The word "Foreword" is overlaid in white text on the upper right portion of the image.

Foreword

Foreword

Housing for all – Policy Context

Published in September 2021, Action 3.3, 3.4, 3.5 and 3.12 of Housing for All: A New Housing Plan for Ireland provides for the publication of a new Housing First National Implementation Plan, targets the provision of 1,200 new Housing First tenancies from 2022 to 2026 (revised to 1,319 tenancies following review by HA), the delivery of additional one-bed social housing homes and to finalise a model of health care for people experiencing homelessness, including a health vulnerability assessment tool to assist in determining suitability for Housing First and the level of support needed.

Housing First National Office

In March 2022, the Housing First National Office was launched. The office is based at The Housing Agency and is responsible for coordinating and driving a national, cross-Government approach to Housing First, as set out in the 'Housing First National Implementation Plan, 2022-2026'.

Working in partnership with local authorities, Health Service Executive (HSE), Non Government Organisations (NGOs) and Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) the office will:

- Support regional and local delivery of the Housing First programme;
- Oversee performance on the achievement of agreed Housing First targets; and
- Evaluate the processes used in implementing Housing First in Ireland.

Housing First Implementation Plan

Published in December 2021, the National Housing First Implementation Plan aims to create 1,319 new Housing First tenancies by the end of 2026. It underpins the Government's commitment to reduce and eliminate rough sleeping and long-term homelessness.

The term 'Housing First' is often used in tandem and sometimes interchangeably with the term 'housing-led' when discussing homelessness. Housing-led approaches include any model that prevents the loss of existing housing or provides direct access to new permanent housing along with flexible support for health, social and other issues, as well as tenancy sustainment.

The Housing First approach to addressing homelessness prioritises direct access to housing first and foremost for vulnerable individuals using homeless services consistently or intermittently over long periods of time, and those unable or resistant to accessing homeless services and who may then become habitual rough sleepers.

These individuals will often have complex high support needs such as mental or physical health problems, addiction issues or dual diagnosis (co-morbid disorders due to substance use and/or addictive behaviours along with the presence of mental illness). The priority is to support a person who has experienced homelessness to access permanent housing as quickly as possible, without any preconditions around addiction or mental health treatment. Then, intensive work continues on these issues once they are housed.

The individual's choice is a core principle of Housing First programs; it requires clients to be actively involved in choosing their housing arrangements, being engaged in their treatment, and being able to pursue their individual goals.

In September 2022 Dr. Ronni Greenwood of the University of Limerick published the National Housing First Implementation Evaluation Findings. This evaluation report described the findings of a two-year,

nationwide assessment of Housing First programmes in all nine Homeless Lead Authority Regions. The evaluation assessed the effectiveness of interagency coordination of homeless NGOs with Local Authorities and the HSE to deliver housing and supports to individuals with substantial histories of homelessness who also have complex support needs. This report has informed and influenced Housing First Government Policy.

Peer Support Specialist Working Group

A working group was established in July 2022 to develop and build consensus on the recruitment and training of peer support specialists, in an Irish Housing First context. The expected outcome of this group was to produce a Toolkit to assist organisations with the integration and delivery of peer support services nationally.

From the outset, stakeholders involved in the contracted service delivery of Housing First were invited to participate in the co-production of this document. These included Housing First service providers, The Department of Housing Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH), the Department of Health (DoH), the Social Inclusion Unit in the Health Service Executive (HSE) and a local authority representative. Cork

Simon, De Paul, Focus Ireland, Galway Simon, the Peter McVerry Trust and Sligo Social Services all nominated staff to participate. The Housing First National Office would like to extend a huge thank you to the members of the group for their input, participation and involvement in developing a document that will be used nationally to highlight and reinforce how important this role can be to Housing First clients and the Housing First Teams nationally.

As highlighted under policy direction, this toolkit will also aim to underpin one of the key recommendations of the Housing First Implementation Evaluation Findings Report published by Dr Ronni Greenwood, University of Limerick in Sept 2022. The recommendation highlighted the need to 'Resource and increase Housing First client's involvement in programme operations and strengthen the role of experts with lived experience in services'.

Regional Consultation

At the end 2022 Housing First Service Providers consulted with their staff teams and service users to capture how the peer role would be perceived and to identify any barriers to recruitment. Consultation was carried out nationally, across all Housing First Regions. Over 100 people participated and this included housing first staff, housing first clients, service users with an interest in the role, Local Authorities, HSE, Addiction Services, People with lived experience, Peer Support Workers, Third Level Institutions and Peer Educators. Consultation took the form of workshops, online surveys, in person consultations, focus groups and staff consultations. The findings further informed the toolkit and reaffirmed the working group's recommendations.



Chapter 1

Peer Support Specialist
Toolkit Introduction

Peer Support Specialist Toolkit Introduction

A key component of the Housing First programme is the inclusion of people with lived experience as members of the staff team.

The peer specialist serves an essential role in the team's success because he or she can provide valuable advice from the perspective of someone who has 'been there and done that'. The presence of a peer specialist working as an active member of the team demonstrates to the other team members and to the programme's clients that recovery is indeed possible. The fact that a person diagnosed with a severe mental illness, substance misuse disorder, and/or who has experienced homelessness — just like the Housing First clients — is now an active and productive member of the team, provides a powerful, positive and inspiring example. The peer specialist proves that recovery is not just a philosophy or a theory; it is a lived experience.

Peer specialists have experienced both the service-provider role and the programme recipient role, so they are in a good position to help ensure that the team is operating from a client-centred, recovery-focused approach. In addition, peer specialists can empathetically articulate how clients may view or experience the team's intervention, which provides invaluable insights.

'Peer specialists' are staff employed by the Housing First programme whose job descriptions recognise that their personal experiences can be beneficial to understanding, engaging and motivating clients.

Housing First was developed in partnership with people with lived experience. People with lived experience are people who have been through homelessness, mental illness, or substance use disorders; and who can draw upon their own experiences to support others. Their inclusion in the ongoing delivery of the Housing First programme ensures the voices of clients are present and heard.

The Housing First programme has its origins in a heartfelt commitment to peer support. The North American programme was developed out of a client-directed drop-in centre where half the staff was comprised of peer support. There were several reasons for hiring people with lived experience: the programme valued direct input from programme participants, peers fostered strong engagement and empathy skills, and it ensured the ongoing inclusion of the client perspective in programme design, operation and governance. Hiring peer support staff was also intended to reduce the boundaries between professional staff and programme participants. Finally, hiring peer specialists created a third voice in the service sector community: a body of participants with a perspective and a unique voice. Peer support staff could interpret the participants' experiences for the professional staff and explain the intentions of professional staff to the participants, simultaneously serving as role models for both groups.

Background

Peer specialists or peer support staff are individuals who, at one point, overcame personal challenges in which they needed to obtain assistance and treatment in order to engage in personal recovery or to integrate into normative social roles.

Examples of the challenges faced by individuals with lived experience include; mental health problems; problematic substance use; a history of prison custody, homelessness, domestic violence, physical or sexual abuse; and other challenges. This is not an exhaustive list, as there are other traumatic events that may also be included. These are some of the conditions and challenges of what can be considered as part of one's recovery or reintegration story.

Housing First programmes should have a peer specialist as one of the staff members of the support services team.

The peer specialist or peer support worker should have personal experience in having sought assistance in overcoming their obstacles and should be currently in recovery from substance use, mental health problems, homelessness, or have overcome other obstacles for a period of at least one year. It is recommended that peer support workers employed as paid staff should have completed at least one year 'in recovery' and that they have access to supervision and support.

The nature of the peer's support work with Housing First clients places them very close to the self-same situations they have been addressing in their own lives. It therefore requires them to have a strong grounding in the skills, coping mechanisms, information or treatments used in their own recovery.

Purpose of this toolkit

The purpose of this Toolkit is to assist organisations with the integration and delivery of peer support services nationally. Ongoing support will be provided by the Housing First National Office and the impact of the integration of the peer role will be measured over time for further learnings and development in this area.

How to use

The Peer Support Specialist Toolkit should be used in conjunction with your organisations own HR and Recruitment Policies, in addition to all relevant Irish Employment Legislation.

A photograph of three women of diverse backgrounds smiling warmly. The woman on the left has dark skin and long dreadlocks, wearing a patterned scarf. The woman in the middle has light skin and long, wavy hair, wearing a floral necklace. The woman on the right has light skin and short hair, wearing a striped top and large earrings. The entire image has a purple tint.

Chapter 2

Overview of the role of a Peer Support Specialist

Overview of the role of a Peer Support Specialist

A Housing First Manual for Ireland was developed by Dr Sam Tsemberis in 2020 and it delivers a unique and practical guide that is translated into and firmly grounded in the Irish context.

The Housing First Manual for Ireland tells us that Peers can play a crucial role in helping Housing First teams to provide treatment and support services in a manner that is grounded in recovery principles. When working with individuals who have experienced long periods of homelessness (chronically homeless), it is often the peer support worker who can best relate to the client's experience and, by demonstrating this understanding to the client, is best placed to earn the client's trust to a profound degree.

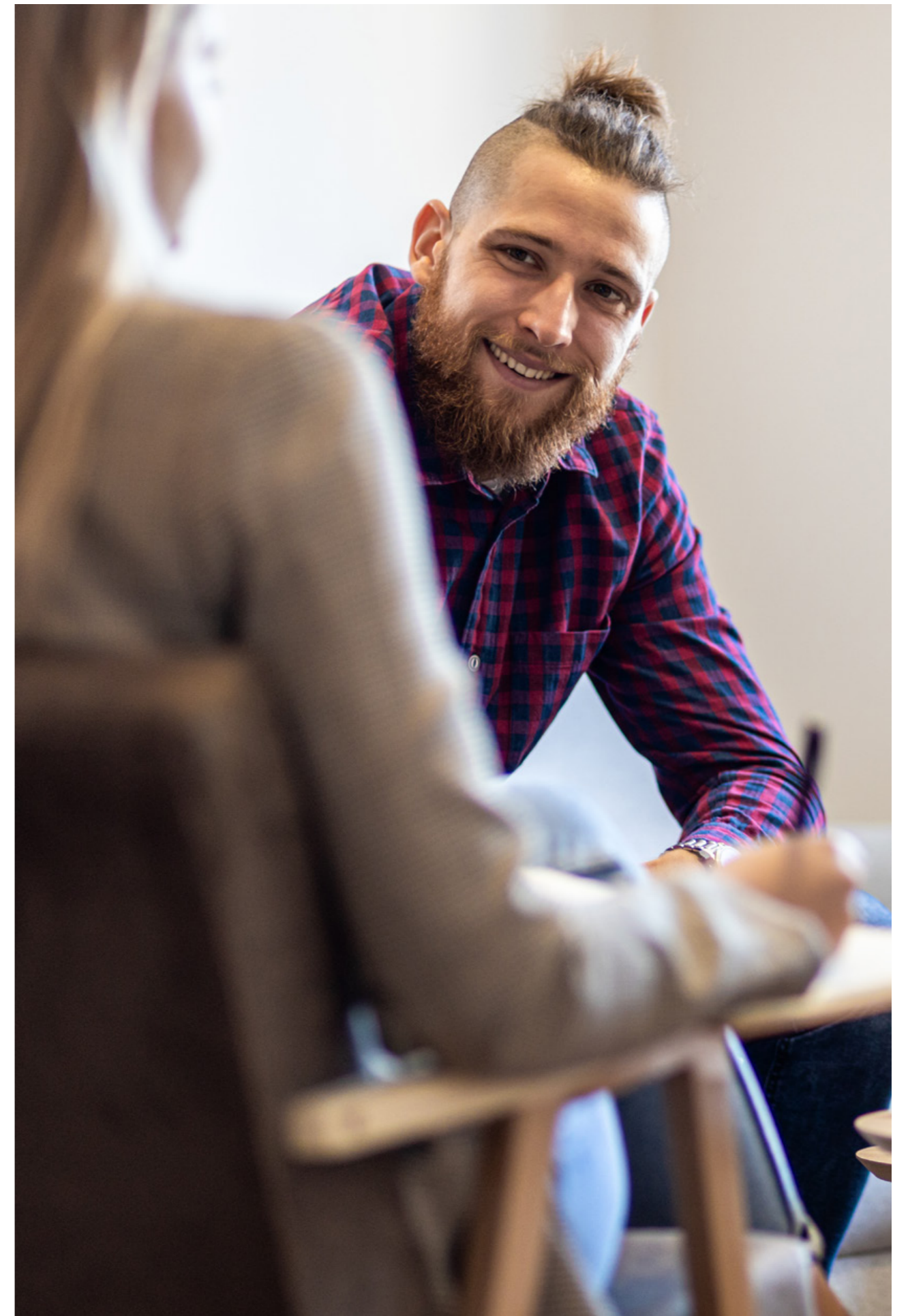
Peer support staff understand how clients feel after they are housed and what it is like adjusting to a new home and a new community. Peers can offer practical help with basic needs and everyday living, such as finding the right supermarket or clothes shop. Providing meaningful and practical assistance with day-to-day struggles and offering effective and sustained support is the basis of developing a caring and trusting relationship, and hopefully serves the client as a model for developing other relationships.

From the perspective of the client, the services offered by the traditional staff may be perceived as 'the employee is doing their job'. Clients understand that this is an employee of an agency who is paid to provide a service. Employees operate in a formal and professional manner; they are bound by agency rules of conduct, agency policies and procedures,

professional standards of ethics and conduct that determine what they say to the client and how they may intervene. These professional and agency norms can create a certain 'distance' and may be a subtle barrier to connecting with individuals who have shunned or are mistrustful of 'the system'. The peer specialist can help to reduce this distance as they have walked in the client's shoes, have 'been there, done that' and are professionals in their own right based upon this lived experience

Peer support specialists can provide other Housing First team members with insights from the client's perspective and thereby improve the quality of care provided by the team. The peer can provide team members with insight into the experience of being homeless, being evicted, feeling suicidal, and managing day-to-day life while in the throes of all that turmoil. Peers can also assist the team in overcoming obstacles to engage clients, especially those that distance themselves from traditional treatment providers.

Properly integrated peer support can assist the team by providing a client lens in a trauma-informed approach. During team meetings and case conferencing, peer specialists can help raise awareness by pointing out how stigma, fear and professional bias may interfere with seeing the client clearly. There may be socioeconomic, educational and ethno-racial differences between team members and the clients served; and the peer may be able to offer some awareness in noting these differences. Additionally, the peer's presence and participation in the ordinary day-to-day operation of the team serves every day as a powerful reminder to both team members and clients that recovery is possible.





Chapter 3
Preparing your
organisation

Preparing your organisation

A thorough understanding of the role of the Peer Support Specialist is fundamental to the success and integration of this role within the organisation and the wider Housing First Team.

Peer Specialists will contribute a wealth of additional knowledge, emotional and practical support and understanding of Housing First clients, which will in turn significantly enhance the effectiveness of the service provision delivered.

The culture of the Housing First team is defined by the values of the Housing First programme, as well as the team's operational guidelines. These values shape the way team-members address programme clients and each other and serve as guidelines for the team's practices and day-to-day operation. A respectful, warm, and affirming disposition when relating to clients and/or other staff constitutes an essential dimension of recovery. The team that operates in this way is essentially modelling recovery for their clients and themselves.

Effective teams are characterised by:

- Team members having a shared vision and goals for their clients and for the team.
- Agreement about practice protocols.
- Members who feel free to introduce or explore new ideas; and
- Members who have a sense of psychological safety while working as a team.

Developing the right team culture requires selecting

the right staff. One of the keys to an effective team is selecting staff-members who share the humanitarian and social justice values upon which the Housing First programme is based.

The language used by Housing First staff to speak about clients among themselves or in a meeting should be that used as if the client is present. Staff must view people in the programme without prejudice and not judge people based on their life circumstances, life choices or history. Staff should treat each person with dignity and warmth. Humour is common in the programme, but never at the expense of the client. All people in the programme, staff and clients included, are recognised as having their own personality quirks and needs and as complex individuals.

HR / Staffing policies should be developed to support and facilitate the peer support specialist role. This further enhances the organisational commitment of employing peers in a meaningful way through paid employment and can also offer a pathway for future development to the peer.





Chapter 4

Recruiting a Peer
Support Specialist

Recruiting a Peer Support Specialist

The Housing First Manual strongly recommends that all Housing First programs should include paid staff employed as peer specialists as one of the members of the support services team.

The peer specialist or peer support worker should have personal experience in having sought assistance in overcoming their obstacles and is currently in recovery from substance use, mental health problems, homelessness, or has overcome other obstacles for a period of at least one year. Those who are early in their recovery or transition should be actively seeking assistance and support due to the nature of peer support work. It may be worthwhile establishing that the peer has engaged in treatment programmes, continues to make use of supports and is willing to reflect on these with their supervisor as part of the role.

Housing First Service Providers that have not employed peer support workers in the past should develop appropriate HR policies and supervision processes when hiring peers. The Housing First Manual tells us that Peer support is an entirely different discipline that requires different knowledge and skills. The goal is to develop and expand the skillset of the Housing First team through the addition of a peer worker. It is not to train peer workers to become like all the other staff. Traditional social service providers must recognise peer support as a discipline requiring a unique and special supervision and support.

Additionally, it is recommended where possible, that two Peer Support Specialists would be recruited simultaneously. This can be hugely important in mitigating against isolation in the role and also offer choice to clients and peer specialists where there are previous relationships or a local connection.

It is recommended that peer support workers employed as paid staff should have completed at least one year 'in recovery' and that they have access to supervision and support. The nature of the support services provided and the content of the interactions with clients places the peer specialist very close to the very situations they were dealing with and requires peers to have a strong grounding in the skills, coping mechanisms, information, or treatments that they have used or continue to use in their recovery.

Hiring Peers

Employing and maintaining peer support staff can be a time-consuming task. Organisations who have not employed peer support specialists in the past sometimes struggle with developing policies to address the kind of accommodations needed to successfully hire and support peers in order to engage and retain them. Hiring previous clients or current clients of an organisation's services is one common practice for recovery-oriented organisations. There are advantages and disadvantages to this approach. It is recommended that the peer roles are publicly advertised to allow an equal opportunity for all candidates and to ensure the most appropriate candidate is selected.

Another area to be cognisant of is that an organisation may hire peers, but may not currently employ a staff member who has the experience of supervising and supporting peers. Peer support is an entirely different discipline which requires different knowledge and skills and unique supervision and support.

The Housing First Manual advises that many problems can be prevented by hiring a supervisor with experience with peers and an understanding of the role of peer support, where this is possible. Such a supervisor will avoid the all too common pitfall of allowing clinical staff to use the peer specialist as assistants to the case managers.


If such practices are allowed by the team leader, the peer support workers can begin to feel like they are subordinate to other staff members, and this can diminish the positive impact of their 'peer approach' for the team and the clients.

See further details in relation to Supervision in Chapter 5.

Developing a Job Description for a Peer Support Specialist (PSS)

A sample Job Description and Application Form has been provided at Appendix 1 and 2 of this document. In developing this job specification it is important to outline the activities the organisation will expect the PSS to participate in and to ensure this is clear from the recruitment stage. If there is a pre-determined recovery period of time required of the PSS it is worth considering if this could be flexible in any way. It is vital to outline the remuneration the PSS will receive for the time they dedicate to their role and supporting clients.





Chapter 5

Training and supervision

Training and supervision

The Housing First Manual recommends that Peer support specialists should be trained and certified (if possible) in their specialty.

They should receive core Housing First training and any other training available to the rest of the MDT team. Training must also focus on issues of maintaining boundaries in the contexts of engagement and building authentic and trusting relationships with clients. Special attention should be given to when and how peers can disclose that they have direct lived experience, as well as experience as a recipient of services.

Peer support specialists should be trained to develop and learn how to use their own 'recovery story'. No two recovery stories are the same, despite many similarities that have a connective and relatable quality that makes its use effective.

The recovery story begins with a peer's difficult times, including the moment they felt most hopeless. In peer training programmes, supervisors teach the peer specialist that the 'hopeless place' is not somewhere to spend a lot of time, but a limited amount of sharing is required to demonstrate their common experience with the client. Most of the recovery story

should be spent discussing how the peer overcame their issues; how they tapped into their own strengths; about the skills they had to develop; how they used treatment, support, and community resources, etc. The information provided by the peer should not be presented as advice. Rather, it is rooted in modelling and relatability.

The Peer support specialists lived experience can be used as a mechanism of establishing a connection between themselves and the client. Once this connection is in place there is an opportunity to motivate, nurture and empower the Housing First client and this relationship is built upon trust.

Training

A Peer support specialist working in a Housing First program should have training, and if available, receive a certification in peer support work, as per the Housing First Manual for Ireland. Obtaining certification usually requires attending classes, participating in role-plays, one-on-one support, group facilitation, and ideally a field placement working directly with a multidisciplinary intensive case management (ICM) or assertive community treatment (ACT) teams or some other version of case management teams. Training should include modules on integrated dual diagnosis treatment, motivational interviewing, trauma informed care and person-centred planning to provide peers with the language and knowledge that are the core practices of their fellow teammates and their Housing First team.

Peer specialist training should also include guidelines about peer specialists' scope of practice, ethics, how to tell one's recovery story, boundaries and many other related topics. This comprehensive training will help peers obtain the skills and knowledge necessary to begin employment and set the foundation for them to develop their professional identity and their own approach as to how they will serve as peer support specialists.

In instances, like Ireland, where the community does not have a peer training program there are some online educational modules available. It is also possible to hire peers and train them on the job. This will require more effort from the supervisor and team members, but the rewards are well worth the effort. The Housing First National Office is actively exploring peer support specialist training options with the objective of offering a national accreditation to peers for the training modules attended. Further details will be issued this year. See Appendix 3.

Most Housing First support services, whether they are comprised of ICM, ACT or case management, operate as teams. It is vital to ensure the Peer Support Specialist is introduced to the team at an early stage, this may lessen any anxieties they may have about meeting staff.

Team meetings are excellent opportunities for each team member to articulate their point of view about each client. The team meeting is an excellent forum for the team and the peer to educate each other about the unique perspectives of their clients' issues. A well-supervised team meeting can also reinforce the unique role of each team member including the peer specialist.

Providing Housing First support services is difficult work. There is a high industry-wide turnover rate and how to avoid burnout is a regular topic of discussion. In this regard, the use of teambuilding events on a regular basis can provide a break from the intensity and exhaustion of the week's work and help staff members connect with each other outside of client care to mitigate stress, strengthen team cohesion, and establish mutual support.

Peers working in Housing First are highly effective with outreach projects and services, being able to work with a person who is still homeless to resolve some of the ambivalence of exiting rough sleeping. Peers are often excellent in times of crisis and in developing understanding and trust at the client's lowest point. Once clients are housed, the understanding can help a peer support intervene and influence a person to consider and make healthier lifestyle decisions either by directly discussing troublesome behaviour or indirectly by serving as a recovery role model.

Peer Support Training

The following training topics are suggestions from the Housing First National Office and the Peer Support Specialist Toolkit Working Group.

Peer Support Specialist Training should include modules on the following –

- Housing First and Housing First Principles
- Guidelines about peer specialists' role
- How to tell your own recovery story, when appropriate
- Understanding the organisation you work for – policies and procedures
- Being part of the Housing First Team
- Advocacy - respect, autonomy, equality, empowerment, and acting with diligence and competence
- Ethics, confidentiality and data protection
- Active listening and motivational interviewing
- Harm reduction
- Trauma informed care
- Managing challenging behaviour
- Self-care and debriefing opportunities
- Integrated dual diagnosis treatment,
- Person-centred planning
- Managing caseloads
- Recording and reporting
- Communication with family members
- Incidents and concerns
- Boundaries and managing them effectively



The list on the previous page is not exhaustive; however, it should assist peers in obtaining the skills and knowledge necessary to begin employment and set the foundation for them to develop their professional identity and their own approach of how they will serve as peer support specialists.

Supervision

In an ideal scenario Peers would be supervising and supporting other Peers in their roles, but at the initial and early stages of this programme this is not likely to be possible. Supervisors who are not Peers should be provided with training to understand the peer role and how to maintain fidelity to peer work and the Housing First model.

Supervising peer support workers requires an approach that is grounded in positive reinforcement and accountability. Supervisors need to be available to provide informal feedback and support outside structured supervision times. Feedback should be more personal and address the barriers and challenges faced by the peer in the workplace. It is useful to focus on what the peer specialist sees as barriers. Supervision should be based upon the peers performance in addition to their wellbeing and personal development needs. It should be structured, compulsory, continuous and organised on a regular basis.

The Housing First Manual for Ireland suggests that when discussing challenges in supervision with peers, it is very common to hear that their role is commonly misunderstood and that pieces of what they do are considered 'boundary violations'. This is largely because most peers are supervised by staff who use the same guidelines with both traditional clinical services staff and peer support specialists – this is an often-occurring mistake. In the absence of this an experienced peer support supervisor will avoid the common pitfall of allowing clinical staff to use the peer specialist as assistants to the case managers. This is when peers are delegated the bulk of the team's practical jobs – such as transporting clients, assisting with moving in or moving out, and other similar tasks. Peers who are employed in this way may be vulnerable to adopting a more subservient, less effective role within the team. A negative 'them and us' culture can also create conflict within the team.

A well-supervised team meeting can also reinforce the unique role of each team member, including the peer specialist. Team meetings are excellent opportunities for each team member to articulate their point of view about each client. The team meeting is also an excellent forum for the team and the peer to educate each other about their unique perspectives on their clients' issues.

Finally, with peer specialists, there is a need for ongoing training, refreshers and supervision on issues of boundaries, confidentiality, and self-care.



Chapter 6

Support and retention



Chapter 6

Support and retention

Employing and maintaining peer support staff can be a time-consuming task.

Organisations who have not employed peer support specialists in the past sometimes struggle with developing policies to address the kind of accommodations needed to successfully hire and support peers in order to engage and retain them. Hiring previous clients or current clients of an organisation's services is one common practice for recovery-oriented organisations. There are advantages and disadvantages to this approach. It is recommended that the peer roles are publicly advertised to allow an equal opportunity for all candidates and to ensure the most appropriate candidate is selected.

Another area to be cognisant of is that an organisation may hire peers, but may not currently employ a staff member who has the experience of supervising and supporting peers. Peer support is an entirely different discipline which requires different knowledge and skills and unique supervision and support.

The Housing First Manual advises that many problems can be prevented by hiring a supervisor with experience with peers and an understanding of the role of peer support. Such a supervisor will avoid the all too common pitfall of allowing clinical staff to use the peer specialist as assistants to the case managers. If such practices are allowed by the team leader, the peer support workers can begin to feel like they are subordinate to other staff members and this can diminish the positive impact of their 'peer approach' for the team and the clients.

HR / Staffing policies should be developed to support and facilitate the peer support specialist role. This further enhances the organisational commitment of employing peers in a meaningful way through paid employment and can also offer a pathway for future development to the peer. HR should be prepared and cognisant of how employing a PSS may be a variation on standard recruitment. The process should be made accessible for all applicants. Perhaps the existing staff member that will be taking a supervisory role could participate in the interview process.

Support and respect are essential elements to the success of the Peer Specialist role. Furthermore, the supervision offered should be based upon the peers performance in addition to their wellbeing and personal development needs. It should be structured, compulsory, continuous and organised on a regular basis.

It is the intention of the Housing First National Office to create a Community of Practice specifically for Peer Support Specialists to network and support each others roles in the workplace. Once established this can be managed by the Peers to develop and maintain as they see appropriate. The Peer Support Specialist are welcome to also attend and participate at the HFNO Community of Practice meetings that currently takes place monthly.





Chapter 7

Community inclusion and social integration

Community inclusion and social integration

Peers are excellent at community integration work. They know first-hand the significance and experience of the transition from rough sleeping to housing or from substance abuse to treatment.

Peers can help clients manage expectations about how life changes after becoming housed and develop the life skills needed to maintain a successful tenancy. Peers can address needs for socialisation and support during that critical period of 6 to 12 months after a person is housed.

Peers do not make assumptions about things that most people take for granted (e.g., ordering a meal in a café, getting a library card, doing an internet search) – because they have faced these challenges themselves. They can be more attuned and know where to take the conversation around exploring new social activities, hobbies, and opportunities that provide a sense of purpose and belonging to one's community.

Peers should be looking to identify a client's strengths, needs, abilities and preferences for how the team assists the person. In the same way that other disciplines on the team focus on medical interventions or housing support, the peer support worker can be the team's consultant on homeless culture, addiction culture, and coping with mental illness. To keep the team rooted in empathy and focused on recovery, they can provide an ongoing understanding of what it is like to overcome these challenges.

After someone is housed, is where the role of the peer really expands. Peers are excellent at community integration work. If recruited with prior homelessness experience as a requirement, peer support specialists know first-hand the significance of the transition from streets to housing and what that transition is like. Peers can help clients (and fellow team members) manage expectations about how much and how quickly life changes after housing and also help clients to develop the life skills needed for successful tenancy.

The peer specialist is likely navigating from being a service recipient to being a referring agent and it is clear that they will need to be supported in their new role in engaging with services. It is essential that the peer support specialists new colleagues will facilitate introductions and provide opportunities to build professional networks, but also avoid impeding on their role.

Peer support is a completely different discipline that interacts with clients with a much different perspective about what help may be needed and how to provide it. Peer support, when empowered to play a full role on the Housing First team, can provide the team with a 'client's view' of how they are doing.



Appendix 1

SAMPLE

Job Description

- To provide information, support and encouragement to a client / service user, leading and guiding by example in a one-to-one or group environment.
- Outline the activities you would expect the PSS to participate in and ensure this is clear from the recruitment stage.
- Opportunity to co-produce this job description with existing clients / services users to identify what their needs are.
- Recovery – does your organisation have a definition of recovery and a pre- determined period of time or could this be flexible?
- Remuneration - vital to outline to the PSS what they will receive for the time they spend supporting clients.
- Financial capacity to resource Peer involvement, paying expenses and covering costs of activities undertaken by the PSP and client
- Laptops, mobile phones and workspace for PSS – consider integrating with the HF team.

Experience and Qualifications

- Lived experience of homelessness or mental health and addiction
- Have a minimum of 1 year in recovery and feel you have achieved stability in relation to your mental health
- Hold a relevant qualification in a health, education, or related field from Level 5 on the QQI Framework suitable to the requirements of the role; (Desirable)
- Be motivated towards engaging in ongoing personal and professional development

Essential Criteria

To be completed by employer

Role and Responsibilities

To be completed by employer

Appendix 2

SAMPLE

Application Form

Personal Details

Education (School)

Further / Higher Education / Training Courses

Employment Record or CE Scheme if any:- (need to be aware many might never had employment)

Suitability for this position

1. Describe your lived experience of using homeless services and your level of recovery
2. Demonstrate your knowledge of the needs of people experiencing mental health problems
3. Can you give examples of your skill in communicating in an effective manner both written and orally
4. Give examples of a team you worked with and how you worked within that team
5. Are you proficient in Microsoft Outlook, Excel, Word?
6. Have you completed Peer Support Training or any training that would be relevant to this role?
Are you willing to undertake this training?
7. Any additional information you feel may be relevant to this post

Availability to work (hours per week)

To be completed by employer

Referees

To be completed by employer

Appendix 3

Peer Support Specialist Training and Accreditation

The Housing First National Office is actively exploring peer support specialist training options with the objective of offering a national accreditation to peers for the training modules attended. It is expected that further details will be issued this year and that this appendix will be updated.



**An Ghníomhaireacht
Tithíochta**
The Housing Agency

**Tithíocht ar dTús
Oifig Náisiúnta**
Housing First
National Office

