

## City & County Leadership to Reduce the Use of Jails: Engaging Peers in Jail Use Reduction Strategies

Local leaders working toward goals as diverse as reducing jail use, addressing behavioral health needs, and reducing homelessness may want to consider utilizing a promising group: peer support workers. This introductory resource brief highlights some of the policy and funding opportunities city and county leaders can explore to build on the success of early examples of communities that have utilized peer support as part of their continuum of care and in justice related interventions.

Peer support has been applied and evaluated for decades within behavioral health recovery and treatment. Engagement of peers has been shown to [lower the cost of services,](#) [increase use of community-based outpatient services over inpatient services,](#) [reduce re-hospitalization rates,](#) and [increase quality of life outcomes.](#) While the efficacy of peer support has been proven within the behavioral health community, there is also great opportunity for utilization of peers within the criminal justice system.

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Sarah just walked into the Mundelein, Illinois Police Department headquarters, handed her last pills to the front desk officer, and asked for treatment for her substance addiction. Within the hour, the police department has located an inpatient treatment bed for Sarah thanks to an agreement with treatment providers across the area. Just one problem: the bed is at a facility an hour away by car and none of the officers on duty can take two hours away from their work to transport her. Rather than let this hamper Sarah's recovery, a behavioral health peer drives Sarah to treatment and shares his own recovery story with Sarah on the way. Sarah enters treatment with an early supporter in her recovery – someone who's been where she is and succeeded – and new hope in her own ability to recover.

## How can “peer support” apply in jail reduction efforts?

Common use of the term “peers” in the context of the justice system refers to individuals with relevant lived experience. People with relevant lived experience or “impacted individuals” share the experiences of the population to be served, whether through arrest and incarceration, drug addiction, mental illness or others. Peers apply this past lived experience to support positive outcomes for individuals experiencing the justice system now. For example, a peer supporting an individual following an overdose would themselves be in recovery from substance addiction.

Note that while “peers” in more common usage can refer to anyone who shares common experiences, in these scenarios, peers tend to have the additional role of supporting interventions and responses. Peer positions come in a variety of forms and can be paid or unpaid.

Common types of peer supports include:

- **Behavioral health peers:** Behavioral health services have utilized the most common and long-standing engagement of peers. Peers defined here are individuals who share experiences with mental illness and/or substance use with those in the service program. Common titles for peer providers in the behavioral health field include but are not limited to Certified Peer Support

Specialists, Peer Navigators, Forensic Peer Specialists, and Peer Recovery Coaches. As of 2016, almost all states have established programs to train and certify peer specialists and many are reimbursable by Medicaid.

- **Credible messengers:** This is an expanding, but less rigorously evaluated trend than peers working in the behavioral health field, and typically engages people who grew up in the same or similar neighborhoods and who engaged in similar acts as those the program is trying to help. Credible messengers, also known as violence interrupters, most often support programs with violence prevention or violence reduction goals, including well-known multi-site programs such as Cure Violence.
- **Homeless street outreach:** A new trend developing amid the growing focus on reducing homelessness engages people who have experienced homelessness. Individuals with this shared experience go out into the streets or shelters to link people currently experiencing homelessness to services.

## Why use peer supports in jail reduction strategies?

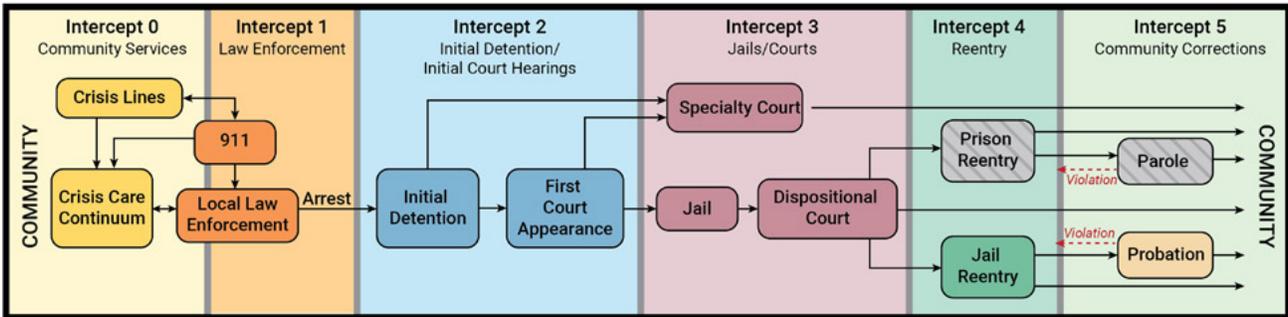
- Peer support [reduces](#) the overall cost of services.
- It more appropriately uses police resources to focus on risk to public safety instead of behavioral health needs.



- Peers relate well to fellow residents of their neighborhoods, thus [increasing engagement](#) in and success of services and supports.
- Peer support can avoid unnecessary or ineffective legal consequences of police engagement, such as citations, arrests, or jail
- Peer connections increase self-efficacy and pro-social [community connections](#), a protective factor against recidivism to the justice system.
- Peers can help inform and improve local policy and services using their lived experience and knowledge.

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In the minutes following a shooting in Madison, Wisconsin, the police responding to the scene call the violence interrupters to support the family of the victim at the hospital. The violence interrupters, having themselves been previously involved in traumatic situations, comfort the family and counsel them through feelings of grief and desire for retaliation. An older brother of the victim struggles with his immediate instinct for revenge, and it is the voices of the interrupters who have been in his shoes that helps keep him calm.



Abreu, D., Parker, T. W., Noether, C. D., Steadman, H. J., & Case, B. (2017). Revising the paradigm for jail diversion for people with mental and substance use disorders: Intercept 0. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 35(5-6), 380-395. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bsl.2300>  
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## Local Examples of Peer Supports Engaged in Criminal Justice

There are many specific local examples of engaging peers for roles across the criminal justice continuum, as illustrated by the commonly used [Sequential Intercept Model](#), or SIM, above (figure 1).

The SIM is a conceptual model to inform community-based responses to the involvement of people with mental and substance use disorders in the criminal justice system.

### Intercept 0

#### Peer supports in community-based services without formal criminal justice involvement

Peer supports in community-based interventions can help avoid or prevent jail and justice system involvement before any law enforcement agencies issue any charges, when individuals need behavioral health services and are not a risk to public safety.

The Mayor and Police Chief of **Mundelein, Illinois** engage peers to provide transportation and support to individuals who come to local police stations seeking drug addiction

treatment. The county-wide program in [SJC site Lake County, A Way Out](#), follows the popular [Police Assisted Addiction and Recovery Initiative](#) (PAARI) model and consistently connects 90% of people seeking services to treatment without recourse to jail. In addition to the benefits of engaging the peer in providing access to services, the model also reduces the length of time officers need to transport to services. Mundelein recruits' peers in recovery through local Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous chapters.

[Colerain Township, Ohio](#) engages peers alongside first responders in overdose response in a manner that likely reduces jail bookings. The Quick Response Team (QRT) includes representatives from local police and fire departments, treatment providers, and peers. Team members follow up with individuals after police assist them to recover from an overdose. Emergency personnel noted a [42% drop](#) in overdose calls in 2019, since their high point in 2017 of 238 calls. Officials attribute this drop to the implementation of the QRT and the team's work to engage, follow up with and encourage treatment for those grappling with addiction.

As an emerging example not yet studied for jail use effects: the [peer-staffed crisis respite centers operating in several states have](#) reduced future emergency department visits, hospitalizations, and other treatment costs among people who used them, compared to people who did not use peer-staffed centers. The respite centers feature staff and leadership entirely consisting of peers. Local governments are frequently the largest financial contributors to these respite centers. One example: The Standing Stone Resource Room of Multnomah County's Urgent Walk-In Clinic, open to anyone with behavioral health needs through self or police referral. Peer Wellness Specialists staff the room, providing linkage to long-term services in a comfortable environment for up to 30 days from initial contact.

### Intercept 1

#### Peer supports in partnership with law enforcement

Law enforcement partnerships with peers can help reduce arrests.

The City of **Madison, Wisconsin** funds peer support programs and prioritizes the role of credible messengers in its violence reduction and trauma response efforts through the Crisis Response Team operated by the non-profit [Focused Interruption Coalition](#). City leaders or local law enforcement enlist credible messengers from the Team as co-responders to each traumatic or violent incident in the community. In addition to reducing jail admissions, Team member involvement eases tensions and provides a means of support for victims and families, thus reducing potential future violence and promoting use of behavioral health services.

The **Austin, Texas** Police Department's [Homeless Outreach Street Team](#) (HOST) involves a Peer Support Specialist as part of its cross-disciplinary team of police and mental health professionals. This position is filled by someone who has formerly experienced homelessness and identifies with the challenges individuals currently experiencing homelessness face. The HOST team has helped over 2700 individuals since 2016 with a wide range of services with a focus on the avoidance of emergency room visits, arrests, and psychiatric commitments.

**Erie County, New York**, relies on peers to provide services in [various programs and initiatives in its efforts to curb the opiate epidemic](#), emphasizing access to treatment rather than jail. Peer navigators, employed by the county's health department, go to the homes of individuals who experience an opiate overdose reported by municipal law enforcement agencies. Peer navigators help individuals set up appointments at community-based treatment providers within 24 hours of an overdose and provide support to them and their family throughout the treatment process.

### Intercepts 2 and 3

#### Peer supports in courts

Peer supports can contribute to specialty courts' goals to increase access to services and reduce re-arrest.

As municipal courts expand their use of specialty or problem-solving courts, adapting promising models from other jurisdictions can prove helpful. The [Mental Health Court](#) in **Wayne County, Michigan's 3<sup>rd</sup>** Circuit features peer supports and boasts a recidivism rate of below 10%, compared to more than 30% jurisdiction-



wide. A Certified PeerSupport Specialist joins the treatment team working with each participant in the Mental Health Court.

**The City of Tulsa, Oklahoma** created the [Municipal Special Services Docket](#), which connects individuals with mental illness, co-occurring substance use disorders, or experiences of homelessness to behavioral health services, employment and housing providers over a six-month period. Peers play a critical role by conducting initial screenings, ongoing navigation for services and attending monthly court hearings with clients for emotional support. The docket serves 150 people annually.

### Intercepts 4 and 5 Peer supports during/after reentry to the community

Building on the use of peer supports at other decision points in the system, some communities have begun to explore new ways to integrate peers at

the point of reentry. Local leaders can explore key opportunities to improve individual and community outcomes by supporting services along these lines through partnerships with probation or other agencies.

**Camden, New Jersey**, launched a peer support program in 2018 for individuals leaving its county jail, [among other reentry initiatives](#), through a grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's [Safety and Justice Challenge](#). Reentry peer specialists mentor individuals released from the Camden County Jail, especially people with co-occurring substance addictions and mental health concerns. In addition, Camden utilizes the [Cure4Camden](#) program as a community based intervention model solely staffed by peers in the city of Camden.

The **Chesterfield County, Virginia**, Sheriff's Office partnered with the **City of Richmond's** Substance Use and Addiction Recovery Alliance to offer training for individuals

in the jail involved in mental health or substance use disorder recovery programs to become certified peer recovery specialists. Participants take a [72-hour course](#) that involves learning behavioral health models focused on relationships, resiliency, behavioral health challenges, communication and more. Specialists must also complete 500 hours of peer recovery facilitation to become fully certified. This certification allows peer recovery specialists to work in a variety of settings including the jail, community-based treatment centers and hospital emergency rooms upon release.

### Introductory Steps for City Leaders to Build Peer Supports

- Engage the community of impacted individuals to identify the need for peer supports and potential sources of peers, as well as how to maintain engagement of peers in leaders in policy and practice around jail diversion programs
  - Identify funding streams, including Medicaid reimbursement if appropriate and available, and peer certification options in your state.
  - Ensure that contract requirements with employers or service providers will not unduly limit the ability of individuals with criminal records to serve in peer support roles.
- Investigate career advancement opportunities and provision of a living wage, demonstrating the value that peer services bring.
  - Champion the value of peers and use positive messaging to reduce the stigma of formerly incarcerated people or people in recovery. For example, avoid referring to peers using outdated terms and labels
  - Wrap peer supports into local goals and plans for reducing arrests and booking into jail.

### Conclusions

As local leaders work to address the overuse of jails, the inclusion of those with lived experiences provides an added layer of community support and trust. This peer support can occur at the onset of an interaction with law enforcement to build trust and avoid escalation and can be carried through all levels of the justice system. Reduction in the reliance on jails, emergency rooms, and psychiatric facilities can all serve as motivators – and increasingly results – for the inclusion of peer supports in justice interventions.

## Additional Resources

- The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's [What Are Peer Recovery Support Services?](#)
- The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's [Consumer-Operated Services Evidence-Based Practices \(EBP\) KIT](#)
- The GAINS Center's [Peer Support within Criminal Justice Settings: The Role of Forensic Peer Specialists](#)
- The Center for Behavioral Health Services and Criminal Justice Research's [Forensic Peer Specialists: An Emerging Workforce](#)
- [Credible Messenger Justice Center](#)

