

Written Testimony as prepared for delivery in support to HB21-1021 Peer Support Professionals Behavioral Health to the House Public & Behavioral Health & Human Services Committee by Samantha Espinoza, senior policy analyst for health equity at the Colorado Children's Campaign.

March 9, 2021

- Thank you, Madame Chair and members of the committee. My name is Sam Espinoza and I serve as a Senior Policy Analyst for Health Equity at the Colorado Children's Campaign.
- I appreciate the opportunity to testify in support of HB 1021 and am thankful to Representative's Pelton and Caraveo for bringing this bill forward.
- **The Colorado Children's Campaign supports this bill for many reasons.**
- First, suicide is wreaking havoc on Colorado kids and families.
 - o Recent data show that suicide is a leading cause of death for [school age children](#) and for [new mothers](#) (up to one year after birth).
 - o For teenagers, research shows substance use, issues with mental health, a history of trauma and challenges in accessing care are the driving causes of teen suicide in Colorado.
 - o Similarly, behavioral health issues, including suicide and accidental overdose, are the leading cause of maternal mortality in Colorado.,
- And even when a new mother does not die by suicide, we know we have too many Colorado families falling through the cracks. Pregnancy mood and anxiety disorders are the [most common complication of pregnancy](#), and half of postpartum people who need help don't get it.
- Second, the number of Coloradans who didn't receive essential behavioral health services almost doubled in the past two years, and we know trouble accessing care can lead to some of the worst possible outcomes.
 - o By increasing the range of settings in which peers may be reimbursed by Medicaid such as the RSSO designation, ensuring reimbursement for telehealth services and allowing peers to operate in school-based health centers, the state may be able to significantly reduce the number of Coloradans who cannot access the behavioral health services they need.
- And finally, the Colorado Children's Campaign supports HB-1021 because peer support professionals are uniquely positioned to reach those struggling with behavioral health and wellness across the state.
 - o Peer support professionals are individuals in recovery from mental health/substance use conditions and who help others experiencing similar situations.
 - o [Data shows](#) that peer support services cut hospitalizations in half, increase engagement in self-care and wellness, and decrease psychotic symptoms.
- Peers are essential to our state's behavioral health infrastructure and I urge a yes vote.



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Building Brighter Childhoods

Madame Chair and Members of the Committee,

My name is Jillian Adams Fabricius, Director of Strategic Initiatives with Illuminate Colorado, a statewide nonprofit working to strengthen families, organizations, and communities to prevent child maltreatment. I am writing this letter **in support of HB21-1021 Peer Support Professionals Behavioral Health** on behalf of Illuminate, the Colorado Chapter of Prevent Child Abuse America.

Simply put, expanding peer supports for people in recovery from mental health/substance use conditions is good for Colorado families. Children do well when their parents do well, and treating parental behavioral health—including through the support of peers—is crucial to supporting child development and parenting. Through the support of peers, parents can build both their own resilience and social connections—both of which are protective factors that lower the risk of child abuse and neglect.

Through Illuminate’s work directly with families, we know firsthand the importance of increasing access to supports for parents and caregivers navigating complex life situations as they seek to strengthen their families. When families struggling to manage life’s challenges and the demands of raising children are also faced with the challenge of finding behavioral health supports, it can stand in the way of strengthening families. Passing HB21-1021 would ensure that peer support professionals can serve pregnant and parenting people in even more types of settings—including OB/GYN practices.

The wellbeing of our state’s children and families must remain urgent and high priority. Please join Illuminate Colorado in our support of HB21-1021.

Sincerely,
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Director of Strategic Initiatives
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March 9, 2021

RE: HB21-1021 Peer Support Professionals Behavioral Health

Good Afternoon Honorable Members of the Public & Behavioral Health & Human Services Committee,

My name is Jenny Hill and I live in the City & County of Denver. I am submitting written testimony in support of HB21-1021. I am testifying as a private citizen. I have volunteered and worked in the field of peer support for nearly two decades. I have trained and supervised peer support professionals. I have also trained peer support supervisors and provided technical assistance on peer support program implementation. I currently work as the Homeless Services Liaison at the Denver Department of Public Health & Environment.

Investing in the expansion and funding of Recovery Support Service Organizations through Medicaid billing is a cost-effective solution for Coloradoans impacted by trauma, mental health, and substance use conditions. Peer support services are evidenced based and offer individuals the opportunity for strengths-based and empowering support for a resilient life by connecting people to the four dimensions of a life in recovery: Health, Home, Community and Purpose. Peer supporters inspire hope and remind people there is a pathway for a self-directed life without the hardship of painful and stigmatizing health conditions.

Peer support professionals provide valuable services in addition to treatment and expand the behavioral workforce. The connection between people who have similar experiences is strong with trust developing quickly based on training and the shared experience of adversity.

Peer support professionals fill a much-needed sense of belonging and inclusion when facing the stigma of a diagnosis. Prior to receiving peer support myself, I believed I had to isolate and hide my diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and often engaged in expensive crisis services. Through peer support I was empowered to reach out for support and was connected to a community of people who encouraged me to heal. I also was connected to volunteer and employment opportunities to give back to the community. While I valued my treatment provider, peer support helped me back to an independent life fulfilling my potential.

Investing in the State's recovery infrastructure will only help more people like myself find healing through recovery support services expanding the continuum of care for people with trauma, mental health and/or substance use conditions.

Thank you for considering my testimony and the important work of governing the great state of Colorado.

Sincerely,

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Testimony - Julia Schultz Porras

The substance abuse and mental health services administration describe Peer Support Specialists as those who “inspire hope that people can and do recover; walk with people on their recovery journeys; dispel myths about what it means to have a mental health condition or substance use disorder.”

We “provide self-help education and link people to tools and resources; and support people in identifying their goals, hopes, and dreams,” and create a roadmap to get there.

Engaging in the Peer Support Specialist training was undoubtedly the most memorable experience of the pandemic because it took everything I knew about psychology and psychological models and turned it upside down.

As a young woman who has been diagnosed with anxiety, depression, PTSD and is a member of the Latinx community, I am familiar with the debilitating effect of stigma as a barrier to treatment, and more importantly, as a barrier to beginning one’s recovery journey.

As we learn in the Peer Support training, recovery is not a linear journey, and virtually no two recovery journeys are the same. This is where the Peer Support model stands above the medical model and creates a completely different experience for the client.

There is so much stigma surrounding mental health that for many, the idea of seeing a licensed professional, feeling comfortable enough to practice vulnerability with this stranger whom they know nothing about, that is if treatment is accessible or affordable, is a daunting and unwelcoming experience, to say the least/

Conversely, Peer Support services are affordable, and in fact save the state money, as we have seen in Georgia, and create an interaction between the client and the Peer Support Specialist in which they see one another as equals.

Just as we were encouraged to look at role models in our childhood to set an example for what we could be, the lived experience Peer Support Specialists possess allow an individual in recovery to see a living, breathing example that recovery is achievable for them.

Peer Support Specialists utilize evidence-based information to manage behavioral health conditions and it is through shared lived experiences that they can connect with clients in a way that psychological and psychiatric models simply cannot. On a state level, Colorado is not meeting the behavioral health needs of its residents. The implementation of Peer Support Specialists are the answer to getting treatment to the individuals who need it and continuing the de-stigmatization of mental health.