



Position Paper: Supporting Peer Support in the Air Medical and Critical Care Transport Environment

Air and Surface Transport Nurses Association (ASTNA)

Introduction

Air medical and critical care transport professionals operate in high-stress environments where exposure to trauma, critical decision-making under pressure, and unpredictable emergency scenarios are routine. These conditions place them at heightened risk for burnout, compassion fatigue, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other mental health challenges. In response, peer support programs have emerged as a critical component in promoting psychological resilience and well-being. The Air and Surface Transport Nurses Association (ASTNA) strongly supports the implementation of peer support programs within the air medical and critical care transport community.

The Need for Peer Support in Critical Care Transport

Psychological and Emotional Challenges

Air medical professionals face an array of occupational stressors, including frequent exposure to life-threatening situations, patient mortality, and operational hazards. These experiences can lead to emotional exhaustion, depression, and other mental health

concerns. Without proper support, individuals may struggle with long-term psychological distress, which can negatively impact their personal lives and professional performance.

Peer support programs offer a structured, evidence-based approach to mitigating these challenges by providing a safe space for healthcare professionals to discuss their experiences, process trauma, and receive emotional reinforcement from colleagues who understand the unique stressors of their field oai_citation:0†Position Statement on Peer Support Services.pdf.

The Proven Benefits of Peer Support Services

Research underscores the effectiveness of peer support in high-stress professions such as law enforcement and emergency medicine. According to a report by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), 90% of officers who utilized peer support found it helpful, and 80% indicated they would seek support again if needed. These findings highlight the critical role that peer support plays in fostering resilience and improving mental health outcomes.

Within the air medical and critical care transport community, peer support programs offer several key advantages:

1. Reducing Mental Health Stigma – Encouraging open conversations about stress, trauma, and emotional well-being helps break down barriers to seeking professional mental health support.
2. Enhancing Coping Strategies – Peer support facilitates the sharing of healthy coping mechanisms, which can help providers manage stress more effectively.
3. Promoting Job Satisfaction and Retention – When employees feel supported and valued, job satisfaction increases, leading to reduced turnover rates.
4. Enabling Early Intervention – Colleagues who recognize distress in their peers can intervene early, preventing more severe mental health issues from developing.
5. Improving Patient Care – Healthcare professionals with strong mental and emotional support are better equipped to deliver high-quality, compassionate patient care.

Key Components of an Effective Peer Support Program

To maximize the benefits of peer support, ASTNA advocates for a structured and well-integrated program within air medical and critical care transport organizations. Essential elements include:

1. Comprehensive Training

Peer support personnel should receive specialized training in active listening, crisis intervention, psychological first aid, and recognizing signs of distress. Programs should follow established best practices, including but not limited to those outlined by the IACP and American Psychiatric Association (APA),

2. Leadership Support and Cultural Integration

For peer support initiatives to succeed, organizational leadership must actively promote and participate in these programs. When management normalizes the use of peer support, it fosters a culture where employees feel comfortable seeking help without fear of stigma or professional repercussions.

3. Mental Health Professionals

It should be understood that peer support does not replace the need for mental professionals. An effective peer support program should include resources that include culturally competent trauma informed care.

4. Confidentiality and Trust

A successful peer support program must maintain strict confidentiality to ensure that participants feel safe sharing their experiences. Clear policies should be established to protect the privacy of those seeking support. Such policies include ensuring that peers, leaders, and clinicians understand what may and what may not be confidential. Issues such as self-harm, threat to others or reportable acts such as child/elder abuse are examples of subjects that are typically not considered confidential. Training for peer support team members should include how to identify and handle these difficult issues. Many states have enacted legislation that gives protected or privileged status to trained peer support platforms with mental health professional oversight. Some states mandate

a distinction between clinical medical direction and the medical oversight of peer support teams to ensure confidentiality when discussing medical errors and clinical actions with peer support teams.

5. Continuous Program Evaluation and Adaptation

Regular assessments should be conducted to measure the effectiveness of peer support services. Feedback from participants can help refine the program to better meet the evolving needs of air medical professionals.

Conclusion

The demanding nature of air medical and critical care transport necessitates robust mental health support systems. Peer support programs play a vital role in enhancing resilience, reducing burnout, and fostering a culture of mutual support and well-being. ASTNA firmly supports the widespread development, funding, and implementation of peer support services as a fundamental component of a sustainable and healthy workforce. By prioritizing peer support, the air medical community can improve not only the mental health of its professionals but also the quality of patient care they provide.

Sources

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