

Peer Supports Improve Pretrial Justice Outcomes

Michael Beltran, Stanley Feliciano, Daniel A. Rosen, Shahiem Smith, and Ashia Wilson

Why Peers?

Across the country, pretrial systems are strained. In some places, pretrial services staff manage caseloads of up to 900 people. They are often unable to meet people's basic needs like housing, transportation, and mental health. People often feel overwhelmed and unsupported, and they lack stability. As a result, they often miss court appearances. In fact, one in six felony cases ends in a missed court appearance. Programs rooted in punishment, not support, worsen outcomes. Missing court appearances isn't just a compliance issue; it's a health and access issue.

Forty-four percent of people in local jails have a mental illness (Bronson & Berzofsky, 2017).

Peers Show The Way

Peer support roles vary by state, agency, and setting, but their purpose is consistent: to walk alongside people navigating complex systems. Peer supports provide guidance rooted in their own experience, fill service gaps, reduce confusion, and help people move forward when the system feels too overwhelming to face alone.



Court Navigator

Recovery Coach

Reentry Specialist

Peer Mentor

Forensic Peer

A cross-site study found a 43% reduction in inpatient services and a 30% increase in outpatient visits among those receiving peer support (Pearson, 2023).

Peer supports act as a bridge between clients and the system, reducing the pressure on overextended pretrial teams.

Guidance and Navigation

Peer supports empower people to advocate for themselves and navigate complex systems—from court to treatment and recovery. They meet people where they are and guide them forward.



Case Management
Navigating services and connecting to resources



Reentry Coordination
Supporting the transition from incarceration back into the community



Therapeutic Interventions
Providing supportive counseling and facilitating groups



Primary Care Support
Engaging with healthcare services



Pretrial Navigation
Assisting with court conditions and compliance



Crisis Intervention
Responding to urgent situations or mental health crises

Peers are increasingly integrated into criminal justice programs, such as co-responder teams, crisis stabilization units, and reentry programs (Lee, 2021).

Shaping the Future of Justice

Peer support began in behavioral health and addiction recovery. Today, peers step into courts, reentry programs, jails, and

even policy roles. In Duluth, Minnesota, a single post-overdose outreach role expanded into a team supporting people on probation, in custody, and returning home after incarceration. In Arizona, peer certification is standardized through the state's Medicaid agency.

Examples of Peer Support Programs

Mundelein, Illinois
Drug treatment referrals

Austin, Texas
Homeless outreach teams

Madison, Wisconsin
Credible messengers assisting law enforcement officers

Wayne County, Michigan
Mental health court program

Today, peers aren't just showing up in support roles; they're shaping the very systems they once struggled to navigate.

Before peers could support others, they had to first survive the system themselves. For many, pretrial was the most confusing and destabilizing part of their involvement in the justice system.

Stanley Feliciano

"One of the hardest things for me was the sheer uncertainty. Every day felt like being stuck in limbo...just waiting for court dates that kept getting pushed back. I saw so many people struggling with the legal system itself. It's incredibly confusing, especially if it's your first time in."

Lived Experience

Returning to the community from jail or prison can be a complex and frustrating process. Coming home doesn't mean coming back to stability. For many, reentry is a maze of unmet needs, and for those on pretrial supervision, the pressure is immediate.

Reentry

"What I have seen help people who are justice-involved is being listened to by someone who understands how the justice system works. They are able to offer real-time solutions and resources. An essential element for supporting people during a high-risk or transitional situation is letting that person know that you care about them. As a person in recovery, I believe that a peer's role is to model recovery expectations and talk about what it looks like to live them out. Being a living example of what recovery looks like often speaks volumes and breaks down boundaries that words cannot."

Kyle Colleen Black

Rebuilding your life takes more than compliance; it takes support, relationships, and time. This phase is where many begin to find hope and momentum.

Shahiem Smith

"My journey to helping those involved in the justice system began after my brother was wrongfully sentenced to 15 years following an unfair trial. As the supervisor of SNUG Street Outreach in Poughkeepsie, New York, my role involves leading a team dedicated to reducing gun violence by identifying and supporting people at the highest risk of becoming either shooters or victims of shootings."

Recovery & Stability

For some, healing becomes purpose. They turn their experience into a tool, using it to help others navigate court, probation, housing, and recovery.

Peer Support

"What inspired me to be a peer support specialist was seeing how fast my peer got me connected to training at no cost, regular counseling sessions, and a job within days of me getting my certification. Because I'm on probation myself, I can help clients better understand their terms and build more productive relationships with their legal AND clinical supports."

Michael Beltran

Many peers are doing more than walking alongside clients; they're sitting at the policy table. From national reform efforts to local policy improvements, their expertise is shaping the future of justice.

Daniel Rosen

"We have to address structural problems that limit good choices for both system actors and those caught up in the system. To agencies hesitant about integrating peer supports, I'd say: Sometimes the 'how' matters a lot to the outcome, and peer supports are how we can create a better functioning system for all parties involved."

Professional Integration

Peer supports have walked the hardest roads, and now they're lighting the way. It's time to take the next step. And they need your help. **Support their presence in pretrial programs, invite their expertise into policy spaces, and help build systems that truly reflect the people they serve.**

Acknowledgments



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Visit the APPR website to read the full responses.

About the Authors and Contributors

Michael Beltran is a peer support specialist and behavioral health technician who draws on his own experience in the justice system to support others impacted by it. He also facilitates trainings on opioid use and forensic topics for mental health professionals and advocates for fairness and dignity in the justice system. He currently works for The Bail Project as a client support specialist, based in Phoenix, Arizona.

Daniel A. Rosen is a justice reform advocate and writer. He is the cofounder of the Coalition for Carceral Nutrition, and previously worked as a campaign manager for Worth Rises, a nonprofit working to dismantle the prison industry. Prior to incarceration, Daniel spent almost 20 years in public service in nonprofit and governmental sectors, including serving at the Departments of State and Defense. Daniel holds a master's degree from Tufts University and a BA with Honors from UCLA.

Shahiem Smith currently serves as the Outreach Worker Supervisor for SNUG Street Outreach programs. Born and raised in Poughkeepsie, New York, Shahiem grew up in communities facing significant challenges, which fueled his passion for giving back and making a positive impact. Shahiem's personal experiences have driven him to work toward addressing disparities within the system. He takes great joy in connecting with young people and guiding them toward alternatives to high-risk activities, demonstrating his unwavering commitment to nurturing their potential and creating positive change within his community.

Stanley Feliciano leverages his seven years in the system to fuel his passion for social justice. While incarcerated, he earned an Associate's degree in Human Services and co-wrote a gardening curriculum with the Sustainability in Prisons Project. He also facilitated peer support groups, focusing on coping with incarceration and on LGBTQ+ advocacy. Stanley brought with him the unique perspective of being a Child of a Deaf Adult, and he advocates for the incarcerated deaf population. Currently, he volunteers with Black and Pink, an organization that advocates for and provides penpal services to incarcerated LGBTQIA+ people.

Ashia Wilson is a mother, author, podcast host, and advocate for returning citizens and people experiencing homelessness. She began her advocacy work with Nation Outside, later served as Program Coordinator at Northwest Initiative, and was the Manager of Authentic Engagement at the Michigan Coalition Against Homelessness. Guided by her belief that everyone deserves a second chance, she continues to drive change through policy, service, and storytelling.

Kyle Colleen Black is a licensed peer support and addiction mentor. Her desire to help people led to her employment as a Policy and Outreach Associate at the Oregon Justice Resource Center, a nonprofit law firm that prioritizes providing accessible legal representation and services to community members affected by poverty, bias, disparity, and the carceral system.

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