



Module 7: Connecting Mental Health Consumers to Parks

Learning Objectives:

1. Identify 3 different types of mental health service settings
2. Understand strategies to include mental health consumers and providers to parks across service settings
3. Describe the unique role of peer support specialists

Connecting with Mental Health Service Settings

Mental health consumers use a wide array of services in a variety of settings. In this section, we review types of mental health service settings and identify specific strategies that you can implement to connect mental health consumers and providers to parks in each of these settings.

Inpatient Settings. Most hospitals have a behavioral health unit providing acute (two weeks or less) inpatient psychiatric care. Typically, individuals in these settings have restricted opportunities to connect with others, as well as leave the unit they are on. You might be wondering how you can connect consumers in inpatient settings to parks. One idea is to incorporate parks into transition and discharge planning. Oftentimes, much attention is given to consumers' therapy and medication management, and a lack of attention is given to consumers' quality of life in the community. This is where you come in! Take these steps to connect with inpatient settings:

1. **Establish a relationship.** Contact administrators working in the unit about leading an information session on the benefits of parks for people with SMI. Typically, consumers attend a series of groups throughout the day—find out if you can come in as a guest!
2. **Provide information and resources. This** could be done in a few ways. Volunteer to facilitate an information session with participants. Typically, consumers in inpatient settings attend a series of groups throughout the day. Volunteer to be a guest speaker at one of these groups! Support participants to identify parks that are close to them and would be accessible after discharge from the unit.
3. **Support participants to make a “park plan.”** Share all the info you have with consumers! There may be an upcoming event at a park that occurs shortly after an individual is discharged. Support consumers to identify parks activities and events they'd like to attend, who in their lives they would like to invite, and make a plan to get there!

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Residential Treatment Centers. Developing partnerships with long-term residential treatment centers can also serve to connect consumers to parks. Residents in these centers may live there long-term and have restrictions such as leaving the grounds independently. It is likely that consumers in residential settings go out into the community as a group. Take the following steps to connect with residential treatment centers:

1. **Identify barriers to connecting with parks.** Learn what restrictions individuals in residential treatment centers have in place. Remember, not everyone may have the same level of restrictions. For instance, some consumers may have the freedom to leave the center independently for 3 hours per day, while others may have more or less time.
2. **Establish a relationship.** Contact administrators and providers working in the center to form a partnership. Find out if the center employs a recreational therapist and offer to work together to plan info sessions and facilitate groups on the benefits of parks for people with SMI.
3. **Share information and opportunities with consumers.** It's important to share opportunities that are available to everyone else with mental health consumers. If you are looking for volunteers to help run an event in your park, or if you are hosting a festival, ask if you can hang flyers in the residential treatment center. Offer to run volunteer training sessions with interested consumers!

Partial Hospitals and Day Programs. Some mental health service users attend programs and mental health centers on a weekly or daily basis. Consumers using these services typically have more freedom and choice than those in inpatient and/or long-term residential settings. Here are some ways you can connect with day programs:

1. **Establish a relationship.** Reach out to administrators and providers at the center to share your goals of connecting mental health consumers to parks.
2. **Facilitate an information session.** Schedule a time to visit the center to share information about the benefits of parks for people with SMI. Ask participants about their favorite parks and positive memories of going to parks. Reflecting on positive experiences can increase motivation to participate!
3. **Support consumers to make a "Park Plan."** An individualized park plan might include identifying benefits of going to parks, route planning, and including natural supports. This can also incorporate an exploration of goals and experiences consumers may want to achieve. For example, a person may want to set a goal to get out of the house 4 times per week or say hello to a stranger or community member once per day. These goals may seem simple, but the benefits are huge!

Peer Support Groups. Peer support groups are consumer-run groups based on the values of mutual aid and dignity of risk. Here are some ways you can connect members of peer support groups to your parks:

1. **Establish a relationship.** Reach out to the appropriate contact person and share your goals with them. Discuss the groups' needs and preferences as it relates to parks.
2. **Offer your space.** Offer the use of your park as a space for peers to run support groups. Talk about the benefits of this! Participating in a support group in a park can facilitate physical activity and connections with other community members.
3. **Schedule a stakeholder meeting.** Reach out to members of the peer support group when you are scheduling planning meetings. Maybe you can even partner with members of the group to develop an initiative!
4. **Share information.** Share flyers, information about seasonal events, volunteering and employment opportunities.

Peer Respite. Peer respites provide non-clinical overnight support to individuals dealing with a mental health crisis. Admission to peer respites is voluntary and short-term. These unique settings are staffed by people with psychiatric histories who offer peer support to help people experiencing a mental health crisis to find a way forward that works for them (<https://www.peerrespite.com>).

1. **Identify peer respites in your area.** Peer respites are a unique service. To date, peer respites are found in only 14 states in the US! Click this link to find out if there is a peer respite in your area: <https://www.peerrespite.com/peer-respite-directory> If not, ask your contacts in local peer support groups if they have plans of establishing one. If so, this could be a great opportunity to develop a partnership which includes connecting consumers to parks in the early stages of planning.
2. **Meet with staff and consumers.** Because peer respites are still a relatively new service, there may be a lot of opportunity to collaborate on developing programs connecting consumers across all service settings to parks. Schedule a brainstorming session! Encourage everyone to share their ideas and develop plans to implement!
3. **Incorporate parks into wellness planning.** Since admission to peer respites is voluntary, consumers may have much greater freedom in terms of leaving the center. Share info on the benefits of parks for people with mental health challenges to display in the center! Work together with consumers and staff to develop a program which includes visiting parks as part of the course of treatment.

The Unique Role of Peer Support Specialists

Now that you've learned a bit about peer-delivered services, let's take a closer look at the role of the Peer Support Specialist. Certified Peer Support Specialists have specific training and expertise in supporting mental health consumers to reach and maintain recovery and community participation goals. These professionals have the additional asset of lived experience, and may have valuable, experiential insights into the unique barriers of managing mental health problems while identifying and attaining goals, as well as navigating the mental health system. Consider the following strategies to connect with Peer Support Specialists:

1. **Offer Training to Peer Support Specialists.** Contact mental health agencies in your area set up a training with Certified Peer Support Specialists. This could serve your mission in so many ways! You can use these training materials, as well as other resources listed in the "Dig Deeper" section. After receiving training, Peer Support Specialists would have the knowledge to support consumers to develop a Park Wellness Plan. Further, Peer Support Specialists may work in a variety of the service settings described in this training and have valuable knowledge of how to connect consumers to parks across service settings.
2. **Hire a Peer Support Specialist.** There is so much value in having a Peer Support Specialist on your staff! For example, the peer support specialist who works in parks and recreation could work individually with consumers to develop and implement a community participation plan, with parks being a focal point of participation. The specialist could offer to accompany or meet the consumer at the park for a neighborhood festival, for instance. There are many things you could support service users to do:
 - a. Support consumers to plan a walking or biking route to a chosen park
 - b. Support consumers to identify community participation interests and goals
 - c. Support consumers to develop and practice social skills, such as initiating a conversation with a vendor at your park's farmer's market
 - d. Support consumers to focus on the mental, emotional, and physical and social benefits they have gained when visiting parks. By reflecting on and savoring these positive experiences, people with mental illnesses may develop increased motivation to visit parks more frequently.

3. **Host a physical activity fair.** Partnering with peer support specialists to plan and host a physical activity fair can be a great way to get the word out! Develop a relationship with CPS's employed in the service settings you've learned about and make a plan that enables CPS's to share information with consumers. Work with CPS's to develop materials focused on the benefits of physical activity and mental health. Remember the principles of universal design in your materials! Make this information applicable to everyone in your community—not just mental health consumers.

Lived Experience Spotlight

Identifying the specific benefits individuals derive from visiting parks is an important aspect of supporting mental health consumers to connect to parks. As you read through these quotes from our research participants, notice what each person has identified as part of their positive park experience. When people know they can rely on having joyful experiences, seek social connections or a moment of quiet solitude, motivation to visit parks can increase.

“It's like I've found safety in the park, and a sense of belonging, without being discriminated against.”

“Take a walk in the park. It's nice out there, plenty of green, and a lot of activities. Two sides of the street, it covers about three blocks. They show movies there, they've got vendors there, free markets there. They've got volleyball there, they've got a lot of events going on, a lot of stuff going on out there. I like it there.”

“I see trees, I see birds, I see people walking their dogs, I see people having lunch. I see people conversing, all nice things.”