For the first time, the ACT Institute gathered ACT Peer Specialists from across New York State to cultivate a community, discuss specific challenges and opportunities for Peer Specialists on ACT Teams, and refine a scope of practice for ACT Peer Specialists.

Through collaborative small-group discussions, panels and presentations, the Peer Specialist Retreat explored topics such as maintaining peerness, working as a peer in the community and on an ACT Team, and the emerging directions of the Peer Specialist workforce.


The ACT Institute’s first retreat created specifically for those working in the Peer Specialist role was held on Tuesday, June 6 in the Board Room of the New York State Psychiatric Institute. This event brought together professionals currently working on ACT Teams as Peer Specialists, leaders in the peer movement, as well as the entire ACT Institute to share and listen to the current state of peer work within ACT Teams. The intense and productive conversations about the challenges of maintaining peerness within ACT were matched by a drive for community and a passion for helping others. This gathering will stand as the foundation for the ACT Institute’s efforts to define the peer role and train Peer Specialists and their teams in maximizing the potential and value of Peer Specialists.

The room was buzzing with excitement for the long-awaited opportunity for Peer Specialists to gather and share their experiences. During the daylong retreat, themes of...
self-care, connecting to the broader peer community, and vocational growth emerged. The speakers and panelists shared their own self-care strategies, which included Denise Ranaghan’s commitment to taking time for herself on the weekends and Raymond Rodriguez’s work guided by the principles of strength, peace, freedom and love. Lynnea Brown, the Director of the Howie the Harp Advocacy Center, gave her seasoned perspective of the Peer Specialist workforce, highlighting the opportunity for peer-led peer supervision. Upon reflecting on his strategies to maintain peerness within a clinical setting, Damian DePauw shared the progress he achieved after finding a common ground and cause with the clinician. The goal of the retreat was to connect ACT Peer Specialists and create a sense of community and the prevailing spirit of the day was the unifying belief that recovery is possible, fostered by the camaraderie of this hardworking group. Celia Brown, a veteran Peer Specialist who now works at the Bureau of Recipient Affairs for the New York State Office of Mental Health, reiterated her dedication to creating a peer community. She also talked about her own journey to acceptance of the various trajectories of success for Peer Specialists, a subject so often debated among peers. Carlton Whitmore, Director of NYC’s Office of Consumer Affairs, reinforced the idea that as the peer community and workforce grows, we must always remember those who paved the way and maintain values fundamental to the peer movement such as recovery principles and person-centered care. Overall, the day’s discussions revealed a need to find cohesion with both fellow peers and the clinical team, while still upholding the beliefs and practices underlying the professional peer workforce and larger peer movement.

In this unique forum, attendees expressed their differences openly all while a commitment to common goals endured. Of the challenges to maintaining peerness, several people spoke about the paradoxical stigma they face from within the peer community and from the ACT Teams; the persistence of co-option of their peer role into that of a clinical role; and a general confusion surrounding the parameters of the Peer Specialist role. These sentiments echoed those heard in interviews recently conducted by the ACT Institute, involving twenty Peer Specialists and team leaders. As the ACT Institute better understands the challenges Peer Specialists face, we can more appropriately address them through training and policy advocacy.

The Peer Specialist retreat was the culmination of an overarching project designed to better understand the peer role; it included interviews and comprehensive research of the peer movement. It was a powerful display of collaboration and collective energy, in which both challenges and successes were discussed openly and productively. The ACT Institute now aims to apply the information gathered to create new trainings and refine the scope of practice for the Peer Specialist role so that all ACT Team members and consumers can get the most out of the incredibly talented and valuable Peer Specialists on their teams. All of us at the ACT Institute were thrilled and honored to share a collaborative space with those in attendance. Please stay tuned for new resources and trainings for Peer Specialists, and updates on our work with the Peer Specialist role.

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