

Region 4 Peer Academy Internship Program

by

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Pictured above: Participants of the first two rounds of the Academy with the Lead Regional Peer Recovery Specialist Coordinators.

The Region 4 Peer Academy Internship Program launched in 2022, providing Peer Recovery Specialists (PRS) the opportunity to complete the required number of peer-work hours necessary to qualify for the Virginia Certification Board exam to become a Certified Peer Recovery Specialist (CPRS). The Academy is an innovative approach to building a quality Peer and Family Support Partner workforce. It is a combination of a paid 500-hour part-time position with hands-on experience along with an enhanced recovery-oriented training curriculum.

After an initial training, interns are placed at one of the Community Services Boards (CSBs) in Region 4. The Region 4 CSB locations are: Chesterfield, Crossroads (Farmville area), District 19 (Petersburg area), Goochland-Powhatan, Hanover, Henrico Area, and Richmond. The internships are part-time, temporary positions at 24 hours per week, until completion of the 500 hours. Throughout the duration of the program interns are paired with mentors at their designated CSB location, who work alongside the interns to complete the regionally-developed structured mentorship program.

The inaugural class of the Peer Academy consisted of five interns. All successfully completed and received their CPRS certification with the Virginia Certification Board. Additionally, each one obtained employment at a CSB within Region 4.

Brian McKeown, RPRS for Goochland Powhatan CSB credits the Academy for paving the way for a rewarding career with no limits. He stated that "...it is a wonderful way for new peers to be guided through developing their professional and ethical skills. The experience, additional certifications, and team interactions are bonuses not found in other programs."

Emma Harmon credits the Peer Academy for giving her the confidence to embrace her recovery publicly. She serves those around her, inside and outside of the field, with unconditional understanding and acceptance. Emma stated, "Being able to be fully authentic in a professional setting has been an amazing experience and I hope to continue to make a difference in others' lives."

In October of 2023, we celebrated our second class of eight graduates from the Peer Academy. We had 49 individuals in attendance as the graduates and mentors shared how the Academy impacted their lives. One of our recent graduates shared that his sister is his best friend, which made it even harder to watch her struggle with her mental health. Edan stated, "I would do my best, but simply put, I didn't know how to be there for her. Learning to connect through sadness, to feel that feeling with someone without judgment or reprisal. Learning to create space in my heart to let someone truly express themselves without judgment. Learning to connect first and everything else comes after. This skill was the most powerful of them all and I have the Region 4 Peer Academy through RBHA to thank for that."

As we enter our third year of the program, we are tremendously proud of the positive impact, both personally and professionally, we have been able to provide to all the individuals involved in the Academy. We are excited to continue the program and are looking forward to what our next class of graduates will bring.

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From the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services webpage:

What are Peer Support Services? Peer support services are an evidence-based model of care which consists of a qualified peer support provider who assists individuals with their recovery.

What is a Peer Recovery Specialist? A Peer Recovery Specialist "PRS" is a self-identified person with lived experience with a mental health condition and/or substance use disorder who is in successful and ongoing recovery from mental health and/or substance use disorders. Peer Support Services and Family Support Partners use their lived experience to support another person's exploration of recovery based services that can help them overcome the impact of mental illnesses or substance use disorders.

To learn more, [**CLICK HERE**](#) to visit the Office of Recovery Services web page at the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services.