



May 12, 2020

Dear Senator Pan and Senate Health Committee:

Mental Health America of California (MHAC) strongly supports Senate Bill 803 (Beall), which would establish a statewide certification program for peer support specialists and would provide the structure needed to maximize the federal match for peer services under Medi-Cal.

MHAC is the state's leading community based nonprofit dedicated to addressing the needs of those living with mental illness and promoting the overall health of all Americans. MHAC was founded in 1957 and has six chapters in the State. Mental Health America of California has long sought to promote mental health as a critical part of overall wellness and to advocate on behalf of those experiencing mental health conditions.

In supporting a Peer Support Specialist Certification Program to be implemented in California, MHAC joins the formidable tide of California organizations, counties and people advocating for growth in high quality peer/family support services and peer specialist career development in supporting SB 803, to finally bring peer certification to California.

Programmatically peer certification makes sense. Numerous research studies support the efficacy and cost effectiveness of peer specialist services. Peer services over traditional services alone lead to less inpatient services, decreased symptoms, increased coping skills and life satisfaction, reduced overall ongoing need for mental health services, and decreased substance use.

Across California, peers are already providing peer support services. However, there is no statewide scope of practice, standardized curriculum, training standards, supervision standards, or certification protocol. Few counties that provide peer support services require training prior to hire. The benefits of Peer Certification for peer support are obvious. Peer certification:

- Defines the service of peer support.
- Provides a standardized scope of practice, values and ethics, and competencies
- Assures that practitioners receive standardized training and demonstrate competency.
- Ensures that service recipients will receive the same quality of services regardless of where in California they may live.
- Is a basis for the ability to bill Medi-Cal for services provided.
- Allows for portability of Certification to other counties in the State.

SB 803 also makes sense as offering essential support to Californians during the coronavirus pandemic and its aftermath. What people need now is connection and social support, and this is one of the unique services that peer support provides. Also, peers by their definition have gone through crisis, learned resiliency skills to gain their own mental wellbeing, and are trained to assist

other in navigating and surviving crises. As one peer said, “Many peers, myself included, understand anxiety and trauma and have done the self-work over the years to maintain a path of recovery using coping strategies and wellness tools, and as such, we are good counselors to provide EFFECTIVE emotional support.” Another describes peer supporters at this time as first responders, and helping an overwhelmed behavioral health system.

In addition, Peer Certification makes good fiscal sense, and California is one of two states in the nation without it. In 2007, the U.S. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) sent a guidance letter to all State Medicaid Directors emphasizing, “peer support services are an evidence-based mental health model of care which consists of a qualified peer support provider who assists individuals with their recovery from mental illness and substance use disorders.” CMS encouraged states to establish a state certification process for training, credentialing, supervision and care coordination. (CMS, SMDL #07-011)ⁱ This enables the use of federal Medicaid (Medi-Cal in California) financial participation with a 50% match. Currently forty eight states plus the District of Columbia and the U.S. Department of Veteran’s Affairs have implemented protocols to certify peer specialists enabling these states to leverage Medicaid funds. *However, California has not acted and is therefore among a mere two US states that are at the tail end of progress. Californians deserves better!*

Initially funded by Department of Mental Health and then Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development (OSHPD), California began an in depth and focused look at peer certification in 2011. Robust grassroots work has been done toward peer certification since 2012 and substantial government funds have already been invested into developing peer certification in California.

SB 803 makes sense from both a policy and fiscal perspective, and during this unprecedented health crisis. MHAC has been proud to be part of a statewide movement to bring California up to speed with the rest of the nation in recovery and resiliency services through a State protocol for Medi-CAL billing and Certification of peer support specialists.

Please support SB 803 Mental health services: peer support specialist certification.

Sincerely,



Heidi L. Strunk
President and CEO

cc: Senator Beall

ⁱ United States Department of Health & Human Services, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, Guidance Letter to State Medicaid Directors, SMDL #07-011, August 15, 2007. <http://downloads.cms.gov/cmsgov/archived-downloads/SMDL/downloads/SMD081507A.pdf>