

News You Can Use

Your monthly resource for news and information about behavioral health and intellectual/developmental disabilities in western North Carolina and beyond

Peer support training takes off in WNC

Smoky's peer support specialist training is not your average week in a classroom.

Men and women from across North Carolina – 152 to date – have traveled westward to complete our unique 40-hour course that prepares participants for state certification as a peer support specialist. But participants head home with more than training credits – some say they develop a new outlook on life.

“This training has changed my life,” one participant said, “It’s the first thing I’ve ever completed.” Other participants reported they left the training with the confidence to believe in themselves once again, or to find hope in their own future.

Peer support specialists are individuals in long-term recovery from addiction or mental health challenges who receive special training to provide support to those who can benefit from their life experiences. Since the N.C. Certified Peer Support Specialist Program approved Smoky's training curriculum in October 2015, we've held eight trainings in six counties: Buncombe, Caldwell, Haywood, Jackson, McDowell and Watauga. Trainings have been filled to capacity, and Smoky has maintained a waiting list since the very first class.

Key training topics include commitment to personal recovery, self-care and wellness, relationship-building and communication skills, peer interactions, ethics, trauma-informed practices, addiction, veterans' needs, cultural competence and how to overcome barriers.

“It’s been quite an amazing experience on many levels – for us, for the people taking it,” said trainer Sam Sutker, a Smoky Peer and Family Support Specialist. “It’s been a deeply gratifying experience.”



First class of Smoky peer support specialist training graduates

Participants, he added, “bring with them a high level of passion, enthusiasm, intelligence and hope – hope for themselves and for the individuals they look forward to supporting in their recovery.”

Access to peer support can have a significant, positive impact on a person's sustained recovery, said Brian Shuping, Smoky's Senior Director of Community Collaboration. Smoky's trainings prepare participants to succeed in that role.

“Our trainers have a wealth of knowledge and lived experience,” Shuping said. “They engage training participants in meaningful discussions and activities to help prepare for employment, as well as reinforce the invaluable contributions that peer support specialists can make to the lives of our members.”

Upcoming trainings are scheduled for Buncombe and Rutherford counties, the Cherokee Reservation and a to-be-determined location in our northern counties. See our [Calendar of Events](#) for more information.