



Showcasing Solutions

PARENT PEER SUPPORT SPECIALISTS PROVIDE VITAL ROLE AT ANESIS

The Problem

Too often people moving through the behavioral health system lack the compassionate understanding of someone else who has “been there” – an individual who has received training to provide peer support. This is particularly true for Black and Brown people who often feel they are doing without systemic support.

While many mental health practitioners bring both professional expertise and, at times, their own lived experiences to their work, parent peer support offers something uniquely complementary. Peer support is rooted in shared lived experience, connecting families with someone who has navigated similar challenges and can model hope, resilience, and recovery.

The Solution

Peer support refers to individuals with a similar lived experience who can provide understanding, compassion, and hope to support people dealing with mental health problems. They can be a pivotal part in an individual’s healing and treatment path.

Anesis Center for Marriage & Family Therapy implemented parent peer support specialists in their services in 2024 under the direction of Anesis Founder Myra McNair. “We saw the importance of emphasizing the participation of clients in their therapy process,” said Vilitha Clay, MSW, LCSW, In-home and Supportive Services Director – Anesis Foundation. “True change begins when individuals feel heard, understood, and validated in their experiences. Parent peer support specialists create that space by offering connection, shared understanding, and real-life examples of resilience and growth.”

Because these parent peer support positions and the services they provide are not widely funded by commercial insurance, Anesis offers their parent peer support services through their Foundation, the non-profit arm of their organization.

Peer Support Specialists at Anesis

Anesis currently employs three parent peer support specialists with plans to grow that to five. These services are typically offered through contracted programs including youth justice,



Anesis Peer Support Specialists. In Dane County Anesis Foundation offers free drop-in clinic services at community locations that include peer support specialists.

child protective services, and comprehensive community services. Parent peer support specialists work both alongside Anesis clinicians, where they advocate for the client, and independently with the client.

“The parent peer support specialist is still a new concept for some, and not everyone has caught on,” said Clay. “Sometimes families are hesitant to start yet another new system or service, but once they understand what parent peer support specialists do, they love it and don’t want to leave the service when it wraps up.”

A typical engagement between a parent peer support specialist and a family lasts around six months. A goal of the specialist is to connect the client to long-term services. Anesis hires parent peer support specialists that have been trained through Wisconsin’s Certified Peer Specialist program.

Results

Parent peer support specialists enhance Anesis’ holistic approach to care for their clients. Their clinicians see the specialist role as a bridge to another system and have embraced it and the client voice they bring to the table. And clients feel supported and heard. “We want our clients to better understand systems and how they can access support,” Clay said. “That is an important skill they can take with them.”