

A shortage of mental health professionals is not expected to be remedied in the near future. Leveraging peer workers in mental health systems increases the number of individuals trained to provide effective support. Four organizations in Wisconsin are incorporating peer workers and lived experience into their work and share their stories.



Dane County Department of Human Services – Youth Connect Program

Parent Peer Specialists use knowledge gained from parenting a child with social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health challenges to support parents and caregivers enrolled in the Youth Connect program. This program serves youth who have experienced a mental health crisis, have an urgent behavioral health need, and are underserved or do not have services. The Parent Peer Specialist walks alongside the parents as they navigate services and the system. Heidi Stringer is the Connect Program Supervisor and says: “We hear from parents in the program that their Parent Peer Specialist changed their life.” [Learn more.](#)

Eau Claire County Department of Human Services – Parents Supporting Parents

Parents Supporting Parents is a Wisconsin Department of Children and Families program that hires parents with lived child welfare experience to be mentors to parents currently in the child welfare system. With their program, Eau Claire County provides a Parent Partner to parents in their child welfare system. The Parent Partner serves as a model of hope and a source of support to these parents. The goal is to promote child safety, permanency, and family well-being. Sherill Jahr, Parents Supporting Parents Program Coordinator, says: “Our program is more than parents getting their kids back, it is setting families up for success, so they don’t re-enter the system. It is a way lived experience effectively fills a need in a stretched system.” Learn more about [Parents Supporting Parents.](#)

Rocky Hill Parent Peer Specialists LLC

Bringing parent peer specialists and certified peer specialists into the workforce is what Rocky Hill Parent Peer Specialists is all about. They do this primarily through contracts with counties for their Comprehensive Community Services (CCS) and Childrens’ Long-Term Support (CLTS) programs. Parent and peer specialists use the lived experience they have gained through behavioral health or substance abuse challenges (either personal or in parenting youth with these challenges) to help others currently navigating systems. Michelle Uetz, Owner/Director of Rocky Hill and Certified Parent Peer Specialist recalls a client parent saying in their initial meeting, “I don’t want one more service in this house.” After Uetz explained what the parent peer specialist would do, the client said, “You’re the person I have needed for two years.” [Learn more.](#)

PATCH (Providers and Teens Communicating for Health)

Amplifying youth voice to influence health and behavioral health systems and service delivery is at the heart of what PATCH does. PATCH believes health care practices, programs, and policies should be developed with young people rather than just for them. They employ Teen Educators that connect with health and mental health providers to bring youth perspectives to their work. The Teen Educators also do peer-to-peer education on taking responsibility for their health and well-being. PATCH also employs Teen Consultants who are hired by organizations that want to incorporate youth voice in their work. Amy Olejniczak, Founder and Director of PATCH, shares a memorable story: “Our Teen Educators lead our provider workshops, and at the end of one workshop a doctor told me he was retiring the next day and wished he would have had this experience earlier.” [Learn more.](#)