

Statement of
Mental Health Partnerships

For the
Human Services and Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committees
Pennsylvania House of Representatives

Submitted by
Dr. Adriana Torres-O'Connor, PsyD, MBA, MSW, President & CEO

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania
June 5, 2023

The Vital Role of Certified Peer Specialists in 988 Emergency Behavioral Health Crisis

Submitted: Dr. Adriana Torres-O'Connor

It's alarming to see the mental health crisis in Pennsylvania worsening yearly. According to the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#), 1 in 5 adults in Pennsylvania experience mental illness. Additionally, more than 60 percent of communities did not have enough mental health providers to serve residents in 2021, according to federal guidelines.

Financial support is necessary in Pennsylvania to support the implementation of 988, allowing more people to access vital mental health services. This could potentially prevent crises and suicide, particularly in rural areas with higher suicide rates compared to their urban counterparts.

As the President & CEO of Mental Health Partnerships, a peer-centered recovery organization, I can attest to the significant impact of Certified Peer Specialists (CPS) in addressing mental health crises. As a licensed Clinical Psychologist with over 20 years of experience in community behavioral health, I have observed that CPS professionals possess valuable skills, successes, and training that are essential in 988 critical settings.

CPS professionals possess an exceptional capacity to build authentic relationships with people in distress. They use their personal encounters with mental health struggles to establish a quick connection and inspire optimism in those going through difficult times. This shared background creates a strong sense of comprehension and reliability, allowing CPS professionals to steer individuals toward the help and assistance required for their healing.

The 75-hour training program that CPS professionals undergo equips them with vital crisis intervention skills, including de-escalation techniques, active listening, and safety planning. This training ensures they can effectively navigate high-stress situations and provide the necessary support during critical moments. This CPS training is essential for quickly adapting to the ever-growing need for a behavioral health workforce, including the need to immediately fill 988 crisis centers and mobile outreach teams.

Research by [SAMHSA](#) indicates that CPS can reduce hospital admissions, increase community tenure, decrease psychotic symptoms, and boost a sense of hope and inspiration in crisis situations.

Including CPS professionals at crisis centers is vital because they offer a unique perspective and level of empathy. During mobile crisis team outreach, CPS professionals accompany mental health professionals to provide immediate emotional support and understanding. Their presence in these situations is invaluable, as they can help alleviate the distress and fear experienced by individuals in crisis.

By integrating CPS professionals into the 988 emergency behavioral health crisis response, we prioritize a humanistic approach complementing mental health professionals. This collaborative effort creates a compassionate and person-centered crisis response system that addresses immediate needs and promotes long-term recovery. According to the University of Cincinnati's [review of peer mobile crisis teams](#), the mobile crisis team method shows they effectively reduce unnecessary emergency room and hospital visits and helps people access necessary services.

Based on my experience in community behavioral health, Certified Peer Specialists can be indispensable in 988 Emergency Behavioral Health Crisis Centers. Their successes, crisis training, and unique ability to connect through lived experience make them invaluable to the boots-on-ground workforce. We affirm empathy, understanding, and hope in individuals facing mental health challenges. Together, we can transform the behavioral health landscape and provide a path to recovery.

###