

Supporting certified peer specialists living and working inside Wisconsin prisons

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Two major barriers to rehabilitation and healing in prison: Access and Trust

▶ Access to services

- ▶ Far more people in need of services than there are providers
 - ▶ Virtually all people entering prison have experienced trauma
 - ▶ Majority have mental or behavioral health issues (e.g., substance use, PTSD, depression, etc.)
 - ▶ Staff/programs cannot meet needs due to vacancies, turnover, transfer, waitlists, eligibility

Two major barriers to rehabilitation and healing in prison: Access and Trust

► Trust (therapeutic alliance)

- “Dual role” for facility staff
- Concerns about confidentiality, consequences
- Many staff lack lived experiences; residents may not see them as being able to understand, relate, or empathize



Peer support addresses both barriers to rehabilitation and healing in prison

- ▶ Peer Support can address *both* barriers
 - ▶ Access: Large, untapped pool of currently and formerly incarcerated individuals available and willing to serve
 - ▶ Trust: Shared lived experience → understanding, empathy, credibility
- ▶ Mutual benefits for those receiving *and* offering support

Certified Peer Specialist Program in the Wisconsin Department of Corrections

Presented by DOC CPS Program Co-Directors:
Dr. Allyson Eparvier and Dr. Tracy Johnson

Certified Peer Specialists in WI DOC

- ▶ The first group was trained in April of 2017
- ▶ Three groups were trained in 2019, including a Group of Women from TCI
- ▶ The 5th Group was trained in November of 2020
- ▶ The 6th Group was trained in August of 2021
- ▶ The 7th and 8th Groups were trained in April of 2022 (women) and Aug. of 2022 (men)
- ▶ The 9th Group was trained in February of 2024

Over 200 Persons in our care have been trained

Minimum Criteria to Become a DOC CPS

- ▶ General population status
- ▶ Lived experience with mental health difficulties (includes trauma) and/or a substance use
- ▶ GED or High School diploma
- ▶ Positive work and institution adjustment.
- ▶ No findings of guilt on a major conduct report for at least one year
- ▶ No findings of guilt on a conduct report for an assaultive offense for at least two years (five years for staff assault, soliciting staff or any sexually-related or drug related offense)
- ▶ Completion of program needs or no refusal of identified primary program needs
- ▶ Clearance by the facility STG coordinator
- ▶ Clearance by Security, HSU and PSU staff

CPS Exam

Peer Specialists take the exam on the same date as the designated testing date in the community.

UW-Milwaukee staff send the exams, paper-pencil version to the facilities shortly before the exam date.

The exams are sent back the day of the exam and are hand entered into the computer for scoring by UW-Milwaukee staff.

Facility Peer Specialist Oversight Committee (PSOC)

Facilities that participate in the CPS program will have a Facility PSOC.

Membership of the Facility PSOC shall include the following:

- ▶ 1. Chairperson(s) as determined by the Warden
- ▶ 2. PSU staff member
- ▶ 3. Deputy Warden/Designee
- ▶ 4. Security Supervisor
- ▶ 5. Unit Sergeant/Officer
- ▶ 6. Other staff as determined by Warden

Wisconsin Prison Facilities with the CPS Program

CCI
DCI
GBCI
WCI (on hold)
WSPF
TCI
OSCI
WRC
WWRC

FLCI
JCI
REECC
MWCC
NLCI
SCI
KMCI
RGCI
RCI

Maximum/Medium Security Institutions

Common referral reasons to meet with a CPS:

- ▶ 1st incarceration / Lengthy Sentence
- ▶ Anxiety / Depression
- ▶ Trauma / Grief
- ▶ Interpersonal issues (Cellmate & Staff)
- ▶ Limited community support
- ▶ Self-esteem
- ▶ Chronic / Terminal medical issues
- ▶ Behavioral issues / RHU
- ▶ Sobriety
- ▶ Language barriers
- ▶ Vulnerable
- ▶ After hours / Weekend crisis calls
- ▶ History of self-harm
- ▶ Self-improvement
- ▶ Release planning / Goal Setting

Future Directions of CPS in DOC

- ▶ Continued Research
- ▶ Expansion to more minimums
- ▶ Continued strong partnership with Access to Independence & DHS
- ▶ Continued Recertification & Trainings

Qualitative Data - Testimonials

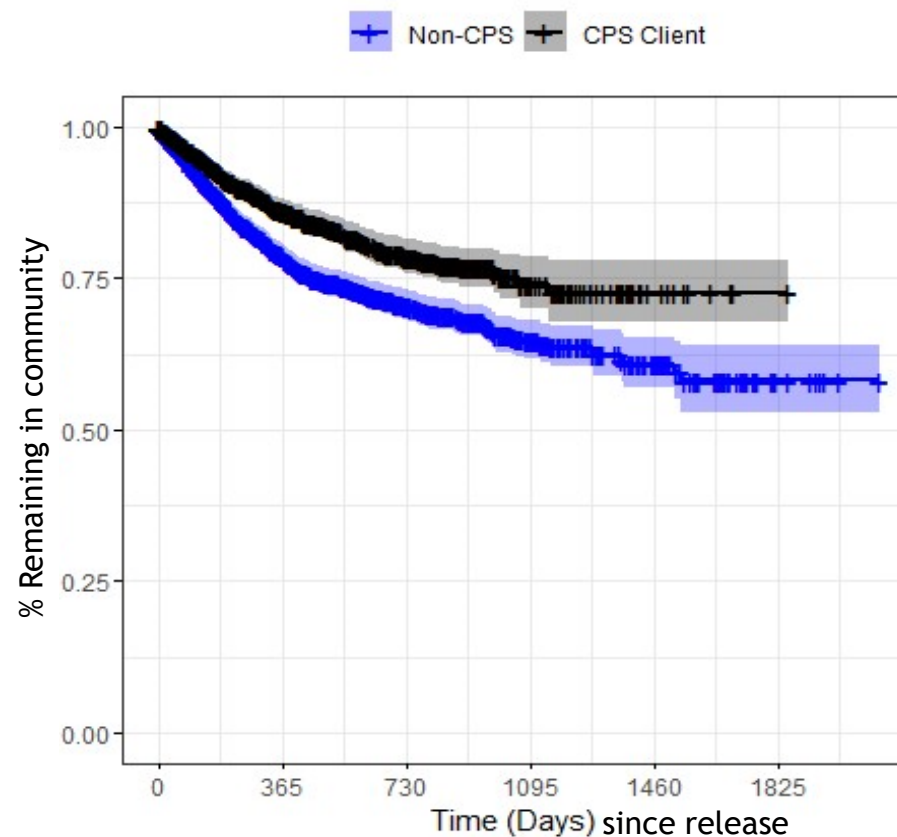
- ▶ Letters from peers
- ▶ Letters from families
- ▶ Impact on CPS'

Peer Support in Prison: Does it work?

- ▶ Limited research; no quantitative studies on peer support programs in prisons
- ▶ Evaluation of CPS program effectiveness in collaboration with WI DOC

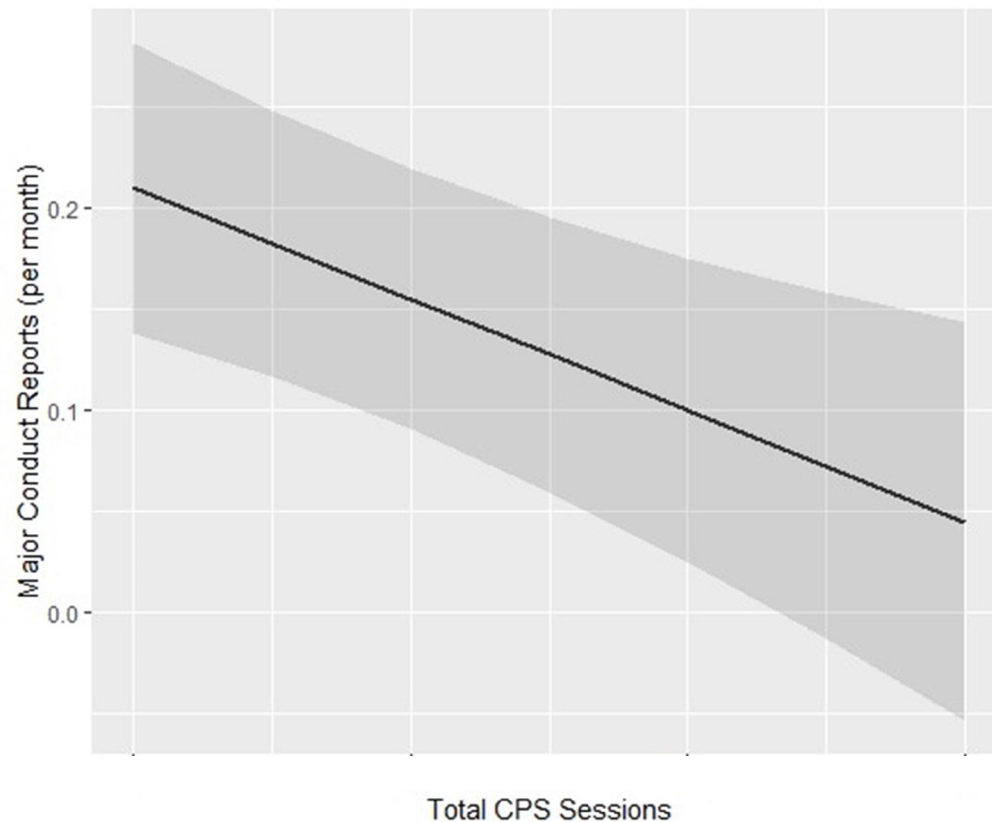
Peer Support in Prison: Does it work?

► Reduction in Recidivism



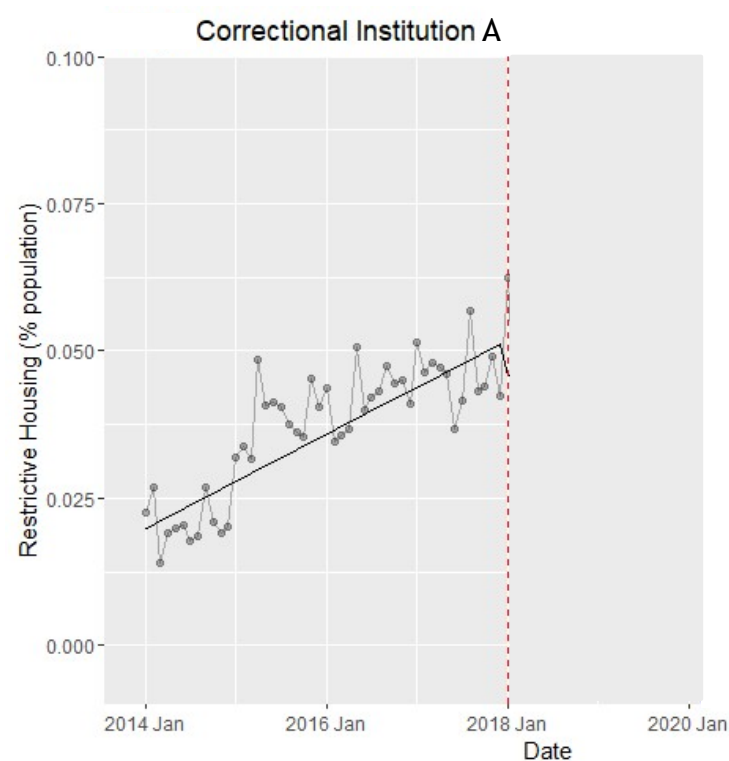
Peer Support in Prison: Does it work?

► Reduction in Major Conduct Reports



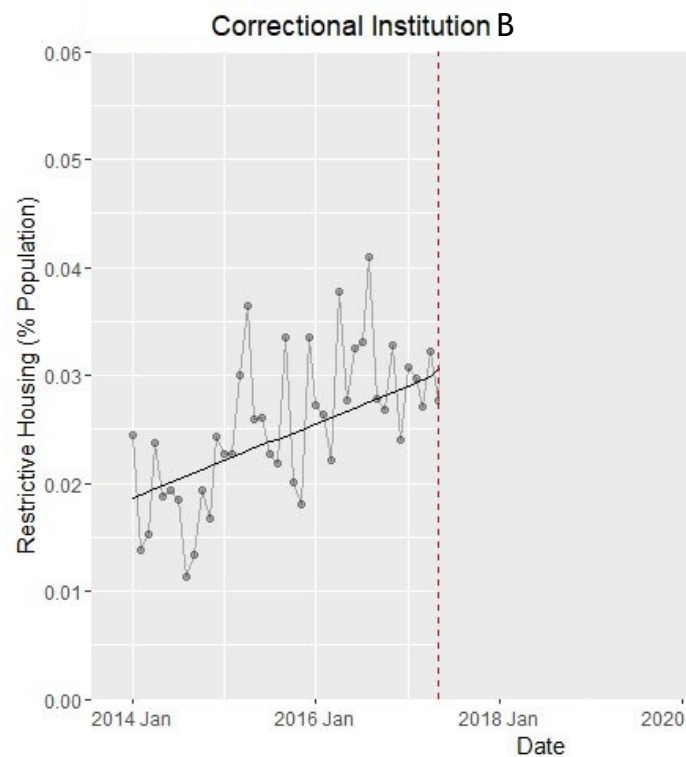
Peer Support in Prison: Does it work?


► Reduction in Restricted Housing Placements



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Heleema Berg
and
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Share your book club
recommendations with
Heleema and Deb!

Open questions about the DOC CPS program

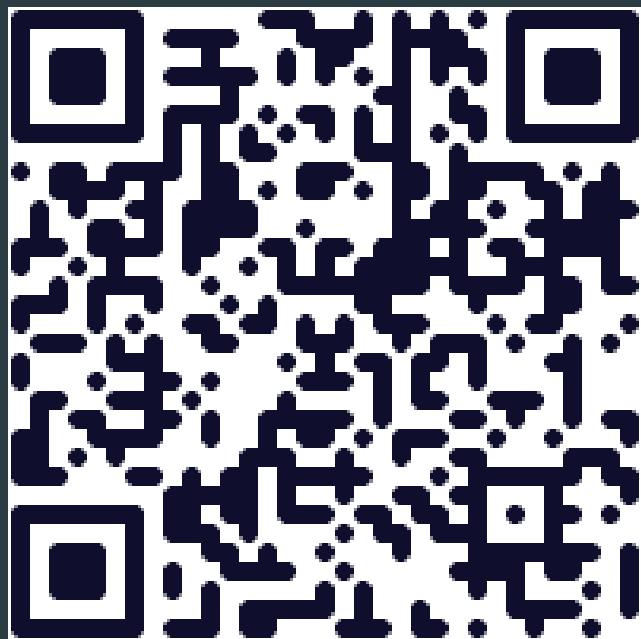
How does it work?

How can it work better?

Who does it work for?

What are the barriers?

How can we best support providers?



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