

ASSEMBLY THIRD READING
AB 96 (Jackson)
As Amended January 5, 2026
Majority vote

SUMMARY

Eliminates the minimum educational standard (possession of a high school diploma or equivalent degree) for a person applying for certification as a Medi-Cal Peer Support Specialist (PSS).

COMMENTS

Peer Services. According to the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration, in the context of mental health and substance use disorder (SUD) services, a peer is a person who uses lived experience of recovery from mental illness and/or a SUD, plus skills learned in formal training, to deliver services in behavioral health settings to promote recovery and resiliency. This mixture of personal experience plus formal training is a distinguishing characteristic of peer support, as peers are specifically trained to use their own experience to help others recover from severe mental health conditions or SUD. PSS is the term formalized in California law to describe peers who work in this capacity.

Evidence suggests peer services can increase social support and functioning, decrease psychotic symptoms, reduce hospital stays, and decrease substance use and depression, among other positive outcomes.

PSS Certification and Services in California. SB 803 (Beall), Chapter 150, Statutes of 2020, established PSS certification in state law. PSSs worked in various capacities in county-administered behavioral health systems prior to the passage of the bill, but Medi-Cal did not reimburse for these services and the state lacked consistent standards for certification. Prior legislative attempts in 2015, 2018, and 2019 to implement PSS certification at the state level were unsuccessful, leaving the "county opt-in" model as a viable path forward to establish a certification program and coverage of PSS as a Medi-Cal benefit. This structure is unusual compared to other states, which often certify and cover PSS at the state level. The state Department of Health Care Services launched the Medi-Cal Peer Support Services benefit in July 2022, in compliance with SB 803.

Certifying Entity. Although certification is a county responsibility, counties joined together to designate the California Mental Health Services Authority (CalMHSA), a joint powers authority, to operate the Medi-Cal PSS Certification Program. As the certifying body, CalMHSA is responsible for certification, examination, and enforcement of professional standards for certified Medi-Cal PSS, on behalf of participating counties.

High School Diploma Requirement Poses Barriers and Delays for Otherwise Qualified Applicants and Reduces Funding Opportunities for Counties. SB 803 established minimum requirements for PSS certification, including a requirement that applicants possess a high school diploma or equivalent.

In 2024, RAND released an evaluation report that was commissioned by CalMHSA on the early implementation of California's PSS certification. RAND found that interviewees described the requirement to provide a high school transcript as especially challenging for two reasons. First,

many applicants who graduated high school encountered administrative obstacles and delays in receiving a transcript. For instance, interviewees described difficulty requesting diplomas from school districts that have unclear instructions or obtaining diplomas that are decades old or from out of state. Second, some individuals who suffer from addiction had their formal education derailed, either by the addiction itself or by other challenging life circumstances. These individuals may otherwise be qualified to work as a certified PSS but for the requirement for a high school diploma. These observations are consistent with anecdotes from organizations that train and employ PSS, including those supporting this bill. In fact, counties report that some peers they employ are highly capable in their roles but cannot meet the high school diploma requirement to become certified. Since certification is a requirement for Medi-Cal federal matching funding, counties are losing out on federal matching funding for peer services that would otherwise be available if the peer was formally certified as a PSS.

According to the Author

This bill will strengthen California's behavioral health workforce and enhance care for those in need. Requiring a high school diploma or equivalent may create artificial barriers to entry and limit access for individuals with the potential to excel in peer support roles. The lived experience of PSS in recovering from mental illness and substance use disorders is the crucial component of their role, enabling them to save lives and empower individuals with behavioral health conditions to lead fulfilling lives.

Arguments in Support

Supporters of this bill, including CalVoices, the California Behavioral Health Directors Association, and other organizations who train or employ peers argue that the primary qualification for PSS is lived experience with mental health or substance use challenges, not formal education. They note a high school diploma or its equivalent is not essential to meeting the state-defined core competencies for Certified Medi-Cal PSS. Supporters note peers are evaluated on their ability to connect with consumers, facilitate recovery, and provide support, rather than on their academic achievements. Skills like communication, empathy, relatability, cultural competence, self-awareness, and conflict resolution are crucial and can be developed outside traditional high school settings. Supporters conclude that requiring a high school diploma or equivalent may create artificial barriers to entry and limit access for individuals with the potential to excel in peer support roles, while this bill would do the opposite, eliminating barriers and expanding work opportunities and access to behavioral health treatment from qualified PSS.

Arguments in Opposition

The California Consortium of Addiction Programs and Professionals (CCAPP) write with an oppose unless amended position stating they support expanding access to the peer workforce; however, removing the high school diploma requirement must be paired with strengthened training and competency standards to ensure alignment with national peer support certification expectations. CCAPP continues that if the diploma requirement is eliminated, they urge amendments to require: 1) Adoption of SAMHSA Core Content Areas and the National Model Standards as the foundation for California's curriculum; 2) Enhanced training hours to ensure adequate competency development; 3) Prerequisite demonstration of proficiency in documentation and digital health literacy; and 4) Annual continuing education in documentation and digital literacy.

FISCAL COMMENTS

According to the Assembly Committee on Appropriations, absorbable costs to the California Department of Health Care Services.

VOTES

ASM HEALTH: 15-0-1

YES: Bonta, Chen, Addis, Aguiar-Curry, Caloza, Carrillo, Mark González, Krell, Patel, Patterson, Sanchez, Schiavo, Sharp-Collins, Stefani, Gallagher

ABS, ABST OR NV: Celeste Rodriguez

ASM APPROPRIATIONS: 15-0-0

YES: Wicks, Hoover, Stefani, Calderon, Caloza, Dixon, Fong, Mark González, Krell, Bauer-Kahan, Pacheco, Pellerin, Solache, Ta, Tangipa

UPDATED

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CONSULTANT: Lisa Murawski / HEALTH / (916) 319-2097

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