



California Behavioral Health Planning Council

ADVOCACY • EVALUATION • INCLUSION

CHAIRPERSON
Tony Vartan

January 6, 2026

EXECUTIVE OFFICER
Jenny Bayardo

The Honorable Mia Bonta, Chair
Assembly Committee on Health
1020 N Street, Suite 390
Sacramento, CA 94249

RE: Support for AB 96 – Mental health services: peer support specialist certification.

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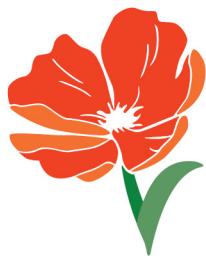
Dear Assemblymember Bonta:

On behalf of the California Behavioral Health Planning Council (CBHPC), I am writing to express our support for Assembly Bill (AB) 96 (Jackson).

The CBHPC serves as an advisory body to the Legislature and the Administration on behavioral health policies and priorities, as outlined in Welfare and Institutions Code §§ 5771 and 5772. Our diverse membership includes individuals with lived experience of serious mental illness and substance use disorders, family members, service providers, professionals, and representatives from state departments whose work intersects with California's behavioral health system. Their perspectives are essential in our evaluation of the public behavioral health system and shape the Council's recommendations.

AB 96 seeks to remove the requirement that applicants for the Certified Medi-Cal Peer Support Specialist (CMPSS) certification hold a high school diploma or equivalent. This requirement is not essential to meeting state-defined core competencies for CMPSS.

Certified Medi-Cal Peer Support Specialist have invaluable lived experiences of behavioral health conditions that enable them to effectively support individuals with mental health and/or substance use disorders in their recovery. Their lived experience contributes to their credibility and facilitates the development of trust between members of their communities—allowing for meaningful engagement and collaboration.



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Amid the shortage of behavioral health professionals in California, Peer Support Specialists are instrumental in bridging service gaps and strengthen the behavioral health workforce by providing essential peer support services.

While a high school diploma is valuable, we believe that community knowledge and lived experience are most important for these roles—consistent with the Medi-Cal Traditional Healer and Natural Helper service model which does not include an educational requirement. Removing the high school diploma or equivalent requirement for the Certified Medi-Cal Peer Support Specialists certification will reduce barriers and expand access for more qualified individuals to assume these critical roles.

For these reasons, the Council proudly supports AB 96. If you have any questions, please contact Jenny Bayardo, Executive Officer, at (916) 750-3778 or via e-mail at Jenny.Bayardo@cbhpc.dhcs.ca.gov.

Sincerely,

Tony Vartan
Chairperson

cc: The Honorable Assemblymember Dr. Corey Jackson
Honorable Members, Assembly Committee on Health
Latifah Alexander, Legislative Assistant
Mitchell Mattos, Legislative Director
Gail Gronert, Director of Strategic Initiatives, County Behavioral
Health Directors Association
Meron Agonafer, Policy Director, Cal Voices