

The Vital Role Peer Specialists Play in Suicide Prevention

VNS Health Peer Specialist Amanze recounting why he decided to become a peer specialist.

Need help now? If you or a loved one is experiencing a mental health crisis, call the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988. For medical or life-threatening emergencies, call 911.

According to the WHO, [mental health](#) covers a complex spectrum that each person experiences differently with various types of care and patient outcomes. Mental health care can range from counseling and therapy to more intensive types of care like suicide prevention. The CDC states [suicide is one of the leading causes of death](#) in the US and that in 2022 every 11 minutes a person died by suicide.

Mental health professionals help people who struggle with challenges like ideation or previous attempts. These professionals can be a mental health counselor, a social worker, or a more often overlooked role: a peer specialist. [Peer specialists](#) can rely on their own lived experience to help those going through a similar mental health crisis. They can act as an advocate for the peer they are caring for, ensuring they are getting the right services and treatment. Carl, a former VNS Health Crisis Peer Specialist, shares how he worked with VNS Health's Mobile Crisis Teams (MCTs) to help vulnerable NYC residents.

[The MCTs provide in-home mental and behavioral health support](#) for people of all ages who are experiencing or are at risk of experiencing a mental health crisis. Teams are made up of clinicians, peer specialists, social workers, and other mental health professionals. The support offered ranges from risk assessments, guidance on coping strategies, building safety plans, peer advocacy, and more.

VNS Health trailblazed MCTs since 1987, incorporating [SAFE-T](#) in the Columbia-CSSRS screening tool. SAFE-T is a five-step plan that identifies risk factors and preventive

measures for safety planning efforts. Safety is the number one concern for the MCTs, and Carl's ability to advocate for peers' autonomy was key to their acceptance of necessary interventions. Reflecting on his time at VNS Health, Carl says,

The clinical staff was so caring, efficient, and effective in their practice that, at first, I had difficulty defining my role. But I soon realized that my experience and empathy were vital in helping peers feel understood and supported.

— *Carl, former VNS Health Peer Specialist*

Paired with experienced mental health professionals, Carl navigated the complexities of providing mental health support to adult peers, many of whom exhibited some risk of suicide. About 20% of the 4,325 individuals referred annually by 988 local centers to VNS Health have shown some risk of suicide, with 60% of those showing risk being under the age of 21. Carl's role became crucial during responses to suicidal peers since he could rely on experiences from previous roles and his own life.

Carl recounts a memorable experience he had with a peer threatening suicide by subway. Carl and his partner first focused on lowering the peer's anxiety towards going to a hospital. They both advocated for the peer to pay their rent for the time he would be away. What enabled the peer to go back to a hospital they felt mistreated them previously, was the validation of their autonomy.

Deirdre DeLeo, Director of [Behavioral Health Programs](#), highlights the effectiveness of the clinician-peer specialist partnership, comparing it to a dance where each partner's steps come together beautifully. "This collaborative approach allows each person to play their role during an assessment. Peers play a unique role in modeling resiliency and recovery in action. Discussing suicidal feelings and thoughts can be very difficult and scary. Peers may share their own journey and experiences, which can be a relief and a confidence builder for our clients."

Despite the efforts made by VNS Health and the MCTs, some NYC residents still don't get the support they need since they rely on calling 911 instead of 988 for assistance with crises. Some precincts are utilizing social workers and EMTs to assist in 911 responses, but the process is still in an experimental stage and doesn't rely on peer specialists. That is why peer specialists like Carl and VNS Health's MCTs are so vital to local communities, families, neighbors, and loved ones.

Read Carl's full article [here](#).

Source: <https://www.vnshealth.org/for-professionals/insights/the-vital-role-peer-specialists-play-in-suicide-prevention/>

Source: <https://www.vnshealth.org/for-professionals/insights/the-vital-role-peer-specialists-play-in-suicide-prevention/>