

*(The following history of iNAPS is adapted from a conversation with founder, Steve Harrington, a presentation given at the 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Peer Specialist Conference in Philadelphia by Lori Ashcraft co-written by Andy Bernstein, a conversation with charter members Diann Schutter and Mike Roaleen, and current information about the organization provided by immediate past director, Martha Barbone.)*

## **A Brief History of iNAPS now dba [National Association of Peer Supporters \(N.A.P.S.\)](#)**

“So why are you helping me, anyway?” The patient was someone who had seemingly lost all hope of ever getting better, ever living a life that mattered, or ever even feeling like there was any point to living at all.

“I’m a peer support specialist,” Steve replied gently, as he sat next to the patient.

The patient squinted at Steve’s face, an uncommon mix of respect and concern. With a puzzled expression the patient asked, “What’s that?”

Steve Harrington was a peer support specialist (PSS) at Touchstone, an agency in Grand Rapids, Michigan and because the job and title was something new to the agency had answered that question countless times for people receiving services. He was purposely not getting much direction from his supervisor, Ted, who knew Steve and the other PSS’s needed to use their personal experiences to build trusting relationships first before they could be effective in offering peer to peer support. Ted knew that each person is different, living with different circumstances, and Steve and the others would find their own unique way to connect. So instead of giving Steve direction on how to perform the role, Ted said, “use what you’ve learned about recovery in your own life, listen carefully, and do what comes naturally to you with each person, and then tell me what you did.”

The supervisor’s confidence in Steve and the others paid off. After two months, Steve and the others reported back to Ted, and their job descriptions were created. Each job description was tailored to include ways each of them had used their personal experiences and unique personal attributes, like a good sense of humor, to connect with and build relationships with people who, it seemed, nobody else could reach. Steve and five other PSS’s at Touchstone went through a similar process of creating their own unique job description.

Steve met regularly with other PSS’s at Touchstone and various agencies in Grand Rapids, Michigan to compare what they were doing and to learn how they could do their jobs better. The support they received from each other was not only important to doing their jobs well but to staying well themselves.

As he learned more about peer support services, Steve realized that he and his colleagues were not alone. There were other peers being hired in other parts of the country. They wondered what those other peers were experiencing; what problems they were facing and what solutions they were coming up with. This curiosity prompted Steve to take a trip to various places in different states visiting programs that hired peers. He soon became convinced of the need for a national association where peers could learn from each other and belong to something beyond their immediate jobs. This, he reasoned, would reduce the feeling of isolation and separation.

In 2004, Steve and founding members Mike Roaleen, Diann Schutter, Karen Murphy, Joel Penney, and Lynette Johnson-Bilski, Sue Clossen met regularly at the Unlimited Alternatives Drop-in Center to form the National Association of Peer *Specialists* (NAPS). Artist Susan Meekoff joined shortly after they got started.

To help reduce the sense of isolation and to share helpful information, Steve began to send out newsletters. The group gathered at Steve's house for mailing parties. And through this simple newsletter outreach, he invited people to become members. He knew that peer specialists could not afford a lot, so he charged a low fee for an annual membership just to help cover printing and mailing costs. Steve spoke regularly with peer specialists across the country and shared what he was learning along the way. He used humor in his presentations and became a popular public speaker on the subject of peer support.

In 2006, the first National Conference was held in Denver. Andy Bernstein, a clinical psychologist who through the years became one of the most faithful allies joined at that time and has stayed active in the organization through the years. The National Conference has been held in different locations around the country ever since.

In 2007, to better understand the peer support services in the U.S., Steve conducted a national survey of satisfaction and compensation.

In 2010, SAMHSA awarded the Recovery to Practice (RTP) contract to six professional associations, including NAPS and the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA) to create a training program for peer specialists. Lisa Goodale, a social worker with DBSA joined and became another important ally. The RTP contract included a requirement for a situational analysis of the peer support workforce, which Steve created from his survey and input from peers he had connected with across the country.

In 2013, NAPS changed its name from the National Association of Peer *Specialists* to the International Association of Peer *Supporters* (iNAPS) to reflect an increasingly international membership and to be more inclusive of peer support beyond the formal title of peer specialist. In 2013, the association issued National Practice Guidelines (NPG) for Peer *Supporters* based on a consensus process in which 1000 peer support providers

nationally gave a 98% approval rating for 12 core values and guidelines for what those values look like in practice.

In 2014, Steve and iNAPS partnered with Dan O'Brien-Mazza, Director of Peer Services at the VA to create an annual recognition day for peer specialists, "Global Peer Specialists Celebration Day", which is celebrated annually on the 3rd Thursday of November.

In 2015, Steve Harrington had a career ending stroke, however in his retirement he has found joy in the simple things like gardening and fishing. He is finally taking his own advice on self-care and his legacy carries on.

In 2016, after stepping into the interim role of director following Steve's stroke, Rita Cronise and Lori Ashcraft accepted a joint position as co-directors for the organization. Under their leadership, the 10<sup>th</sup> Annual National Peer Specialist Conference was held in Philadelphia with over 650 in attendance.

In April 2017, after Rita had stepped down to take a full-time position at Rutgers University and after a lengthy search for a replacement, Beth Filson was named executive director.

In January 2018, Beth Filson stepped down and Martha Barbone filled in as a volunteer interim executive Director. In May 2018 former board chair, Mike Weaver, became the new Executive Director.

In 2019, following the 13<sup>th</sup> Annual National Peer Specialist Conference in San Diego, Mike Weaver stepped down and he was not replaced but Martha again stepped in this time as Interim Director Of Operations until her departure In August 2020.

### *Recent Accomplishments*

*Currently the association has a worldwide mailing list of over 6,000 with a significant reach to the wider peer community through affiliated organizations like the National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse, the National Coalition on Mental Health Recovery, and the SAMHSA National Consumer Technical Assistance Centers, which respectively each have mailing lists in the 10's of thousands.*

In 2017, iNAPS participated in a study by the U.S. Government Accounting Office (GAO) which gave a report to Congress on Leading Practices for State Programs to Certify Peer Specialists. The report was published in November 2018.

In 2019 iNAPS co-sponsored the International Initiative for Mental Health Leadership (IIMHL) Exchange and Peer Leadership Match which took place in September in New Haven, CT, and Washington DC.

In 2019, iNAPS played a key role in the Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders Forum at the National Academies of Science in Washington DC.

In 2019, following an 18-month consensus building process, a national workforce workgroup supplemented the existing National Practice Guidelines (NPG) issued in 2013, with added guidance for Supervisors agreed upon through focus groups and surveys. These enhanced guidelines, National Practice Guidelines for Peer Specialists and Supervisors (NPG-S) were introduced at the 2019 National Conference in San Diego. The workgroup continues to develop training for supervisors.

In 2019, in conjunction with the National Conference in San Diego, the iNAPS board held a strategic planning session to collectively reflect on iNAPS' history and contemplate the organization's future. Following conversations regarding financial stability and organizational capacity, the board humbly decided that iNAPS lacks the capacity to be an *international* professional association.

As of September 2020, the association had successfully offered 48 webinars, sponsored by Optum, on topics relevant to the peer workforce, and is working with Optum on a Supervision Learning Collaborative that is based, in part, on the new National Practice Guidelines for Peer Specialists and Supervisors.

iNAPS continues to have conversations with peer support workers in other countries to explore the establishment of an international coalition. And iNAPS will continue to welcome individuals from across the world as both members and volunteers, looking for strong partnerships with international organizations, to participate in global gatherings and coalitions, and work to advance collaborative, peer support initiatives world-wide.

To align more closely with the mission of a professional association uniting peer support workers in the U.S. the association is now officially reverting to the title [National Association of Peer Supporters \(N.A.P.S.\)](#)

From 2006-2019, the association was best known for its annual National Conference for Peer Supporters. In 2020, with the continued threat of the pandemic and other factors related to sustainability, the board of the association decided to postpone rather than go forward with a virtual conference. The next conference date and format is yet to be determined but should remain a cornerstone of what the association offers.

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*Compilation of the History of N.A.P.S. by Lori Ashcraft, Martha Barbone, Andy Bernstein, Rita Cronise, Steve Harrington, Mike Roaleen, and Diann Schutter*