



## Via Hope Empowers People with Lived Experience to Reshape their Futures

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People returning to their communities after incarceration face unique challenges in adjusting to new routines and expectations, maintaining stability, and managing the trauma and stigma associated with their criminal histories.

Via Hope provides training and certification to people with lived experience with behavioral health conditions, or peers. Peers utilize their lived experience to help other people in their recovery journeys. Via Hope was originally established in 2009 under an existing non-profit before moving under the auspices of the newly developed Mental Health Resources of Texas non-profit in 2014.

In 2017 Dr. Sandra Smith joined the Via Hope team and co-authored a peer reentry curriculum with Darcy Kues, JD and Maureen Nichols to train people with lived experience in the criminal justice system to become certified to assist others returning to their communities after incarceration. As a person with lived experience with the criminal justice system and a professional background in higher education, Dr. Smith was well suited to lead this work. She even shared her personal story in a memoir, *Choices: My Way Home to Me*.

The creation of this reentry-focused peer certification training program in Texas, funded by the [Hogg Foundation for Mental Health](#), is one of only a few in the nation.

Dr. Smith's experiences with incarceration along with established research<sup>1</sup>, shaped one of the central features of the training that sets it apart from others: the concept of "thrauma". Thrauma® is a phrase Smith coined to describe the triplicate periods of complex trauma that individuals experience prior to, during, and after incarceration.

Via Hope's program uses healing from this multi-faceted trauma as a key strategy to prevent recidivism. Formerly incarcerated people who take the training might not

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**"There is a specific trauma related to being incarcerated that is pretty much indescribable. First of all, it's losing your liberties—losing the ability to do anything on your own. And you're constantly being yelled at. You're constantly being demeaned."**

-Dr. Sandra Smith, quoted in a 2022 feature story, [\*The formerly incarcerated are helping newly released prisoners cope with life after prison.\*](#)

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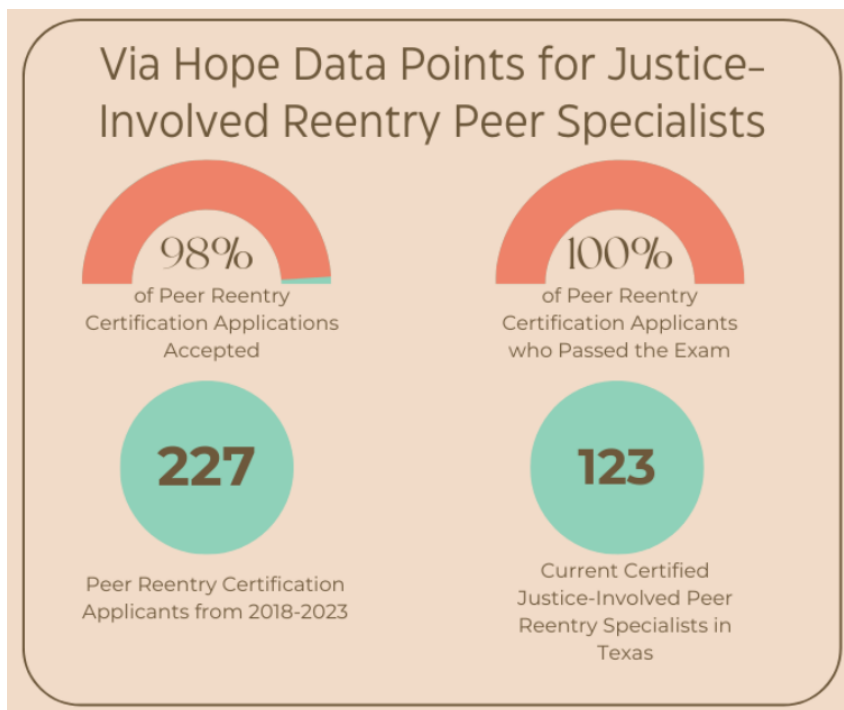
<sup>1</sup>[The Relationship between Trauma, Arrest, and Incarceration History Among Black Americans: Findings from the National Survey of American Life](#). 2016. doi: 10.1177%2F2156869316641730.

have reflected on how their own traumatic experiences potentially shaped their past choices. The training provides a safe environment to share and process with others who have similar experiences. This person-centered approach focuses on shifting the implicit dialogue from “what is wrong with you” to “what happened to you”. There is also a course dedicated to Thrauma® that is available on Pay Tel tablets in 94 jails throughout the country for people who are currently incarcerated.

In 2023, the reentry peer specialist certification became internationally recognized. People who are formerly incarcerated anywhere in the world can take the full reentry peer specialist training from Via Hope and apply for a certification through the Texas Certification Board after completion of requirements.

Dr. Smith regularly fields requests from leaders in other states and even countries interested in learning about this work. As Vice President and Chief Operating Officer at Via Hope, she embodies Via Hope’s mission to invest in people and organizations who want to re-envision mental health through workforce development, community building, system transformation, and leadership development.

Visit Via Hope’s [website](#) for more information about training programs offered by Via Hope. For more information on requirements to obtain the Texas Reentry Peer Specialist (JI-RPS) certification, please visit the Texas Certification Board [website](#).



**Via Hope Press:**

- American Psychological Association. [The formerly incarcerated are helping newly released prisoners cope with life after prison.](#) 2022.

- Hogg Foundation. [\*Via Hope: Peer Support Improves Community Re-Entry\*](#). 2017.
- KERA News. [\*Mental Illness as An Asset: In Texas, Former Patients Find Work Helping Peers\*](#). 2017.

**Additional Resources:**

- Bureau of Justice Assistance Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program (COSSAP). [\*Facilitating Successful Reentry Through Peer Recovery Support Services\*](#). 2020.
- Bureau of Justice Assistance. [\*Best Practices in Implementing Peer Recovery Support Services in Law Enforcement Settings\*](#). 2023.
- Reentry Roundtable. [\*Austin Travis County Reentry Roundtable: Peer City Reentry Center Best Practice Models\*](#). 2021.