

**Final Evaluation Report
Workforce: CRSS Success Program
June 30, 2025**

INTRODUCTION

Initiated in the second half of FY22, the CRSS Success program provides grant funding to ten post-secondary educational institutions, and as of FY25, one agency-based training program in Illinois. These 11 organizations offer training and support for students with self-disclosed lived experience of mental health and/or substance use recovery, in order for them to complete the requirements to obtain either the Certified Recovery Support Specialist (CRSS) or Certified Peer Recovery Specialist (CPRS) credential. The grant covers student costs such as tuition, books, and fees. It also provides funds to address barriers to student participation (e.g. technology needs, transportation, childcare) and to cover costs related to taking the credentialing exam. Students who complete CRSS/CPRS training via one of these programs have a reduced number of required practical experience/internship hours (300 instead of 2,000) required to sit for the CRSS or CPRS credentialing exam.

The evaluation plan was designed to gain an understanding of implementation barriers and facilitators, provide information on who the program serves and the type of supports provided, and examine trainee outcomes in terms of program completion, passing of the credentialing exam, and entrance into the behavioral health workforce. Evaluation Principal Investigators Amy Watson and Branden McCloud worked with staff from NORC to design and conduct the evaluation.

CRSS SUCCESS PROGRAM EVALUATION AIMS

Our overall evaluation plan was designed to understand program structure and variation across the sites, provide information on who the program serves and what supports were provided, and examine trainee outcomes in terms of program completion, passing of the credentialing exam and entrance into the behavioral health workforce. The qualitative portion of the evaluation explores implementation barriers and facilitators. Thus, the evaluation includes the four components, one of which was completed in year one, the remaining were conducted and/or were ongoing in year 2:

Aim 1: Describe program structure and variation across programs. Completed in year 1.

Aim 2: Process evaluation: Describe who/how many individuals the program is serving and how they are matriculating through the program.

Aim 3: Implementation evaluation: Describe the barriers and facilitators to implementing the program and to student success.

Aim 4: Outcome evaluation. Describe how well the program prepared students for obtaining employment and working as a CRSS/CPRS.

METHODS AND FINDINGS

Aim 1: Initial Program Survey. Completed in FY23, see FY23 annual report.

Aim 2: Process Evaluation. This portion was designed to gather de-identified data on enrolled CRSS Success program students as they matriculate through the program. Beginning with students enrolling in the summer of 2022, all programs reported de-identified data via REDCAP at the end of each academic term.

Who is the program serving? Across the 12 program sites, a total of 1270 students have enrolled in the program. The students are diverse in terms of race and ethnicity, with 25% identifying as Black, 61%

White, one percent Asian, one percent Alaska Native, three percent indicating two or more races and 16% identifying as Latinx. In terms of gender, 64% of students identified as female, 33% male, and 2.5 percent transgender or nonbinary. The age range was wide, from 17 to 75 years old, with a mean of 41.3 (sd 13.2) and a median of 41 years old. While most students (79%) indicated having completed high school or some college/trade school as their highest level of education, 21 percent indicated they have a bachelor's or graduate degree. At enrollment, almost half (47%) of the students indicated they wanted to work in both the mental health and substance use services field, while 15% wanted to work primarily in mental health services, 12% wanted to work primarily in substance use services and 21% were unsure.

Table 1. Student Demographics (N=1270)

Race	N	%	Education	N	%
AA/Black	316	25	HS/GED	473	37
White	778	61	Trade/Technical	48	4
Asian	17	1	Some College	367	29
Alaska Native	9	1	AA	118	9
2 or more races	43	3	BA	171	13
other	85	7	Graduate degree	73	6
Unknown/missing	21	2	UNKNWN/Missing	20	2
LATX Ethnicity	197	16			
Gender identification			Planned Target Area		
Male	418	33	Mental Health	192	15
Female	809	64	Substance Use	152	12
Transgender	6	0.5	Both	590	47
Nonbinary	24	2	Unsure	272	21
Unknown/missing	13	1	Missing	64	5

Are students matriculating through the program? As of June 17, 2025, a total of 576 (45%) program enrollees had completed the program, 350 (29%) had permanently discontinued, and the remaining 358 (28%) were currently enrolled or on a leave of absence. Note, 24 students who discontinued at some point during the program, re-enrolled and ultimately completed the program. Thus, these 24 are counted among the graduates rather than discontinuers. Eleven percent of students (141) have taken a leave of absence during the program. Among these students, 21 (15%) returned and graduated, to date.

Comparison of the graduates to discontinuers does not suggest differences between these groups in terms of race, gender identification, and age. However, enrollees with high school/GED as their highest level of education are overrepresented among discontinuers (41.5% of the discontinuer group vs 31.8% of graduates; (Chi² (6, 915) =17.023, p=.009), as are LatinX identified enrollees (17.3% of discontinuer group vs 12.9% of the graduate group) (Chi² (2, 915) =9.294 p=.010).

When known, programs provided information on the reasons students take a leave of absence or discontinue the program. Reasons provided include difficulty balancing work schedule with the program requirements; being dropped from the program for excessive absences; challenges at internship sites; challenges finding internship due to criminal history; personal, health and mental health challenges; and finding CRSS/CPRS employment before completing internship (decision to complete 2000 hours at job). Students taking leaves of absence have indicated the need to do so due to their work schedule, personal circumstances, mental health related issues, medical issues, housing instability and mental health; and their supervisor leaving their internship site.

Based on data provided by schools, 107 (19%) graduates have taken the certification exam and 88 (16%) have passed. Note, the exam data is likely an under-count due to a lag in communication between the testing site and the program site.

Table 2. Student Matriculation

Student Status	N	%	Student Status	N	%
Enrolled	1270	100	Leave of Absence	141	11
Completed/Graduated	576	45	Discontinue	350	28
Exam Taken	107	19*	Exam Passed	77	16*

*percent of graduates

Aim 3: Implementation evaluation

What are the barriers and facilitators to implementing the program and to student success? To address this aim, NORC conducted interviews with program coordinators, instructors and student success coaches at each program, and focus groups with students to better understand the implementation of the CRSS Success program. Overall, participants felt the program provided an excellent opportunity for people with lived experience of mental health and/or substance use challenges to obtain the training and skills necessary to move into roles as CRSS and CPRS professionals. Program staff and students indicated the generous support provided by the program removed barriers and supported students in successfully completing the program. Stipends, laptops, childcare, transportation-related resources, and career services resources were described as helpful by both students and program staff. Students also noted the supportive community of students and program staff as key to their success. Program staff noted the passion, determination and empathy of the students.

Several challenges and concerns were noted as well. These included the need for clear definitions of lived experience and communication with students about the differences between CRSS, CPRS, and CADC credentials and roles; lack of standardization and guidance on curriculum content (some appreciated the flexibility); concern about a disconnect between the program and exam content; challenges identifying internship sites; challenges related to internship sites' lack of understanding of CRSS/CPRS role; and a broad range of challenges related to student readiness for academic and professional work.

While these challenges were noted, students expressed appreciation for the resources and support provided by the program, valuable class discussions, knowledgeable instructors, positive internship experiences, and networking with classmates. Program staff commonly described the CRSS Success Program as life-changing and making an impact for students in the program.

“Watching that first set of students graduate was-- it's giving me chills just thinking about it right now. Just you have people that are coming in and they're like, ‘I don't know. I don't know if I can do it. This is going to be so hard’... To be able to see that first cohort graduate was just amazing, and that they're all getting jobs... Just seeing the spark in their eyes. The achievements that they've made so far is just amazing.” – Student Success Coach

See attached Findings Report for a detailed description of the methodology and themes that emerged.

Aim 4: Outcome evaluation.

How well has the program prepared students for obtaining employment and working as a CRSS/CPRS? The evaluators, in collaboration with NORC and IDHS/Division of Mental Health staff, developed a survey for program graduates to complete six months after graduation. Contact information for graduates was provided by the schools. Across four survey waves, a total of 500 CRSS Success program graduates who reached (or for wave 4, were nearing) the six-month post-graduation date were invited to complete the on-line survey. Seventeen email addresses were invalid, resulting in a total of 483 graduates receiving the invitation. The 241 (230 of whom were six months or more post-graduation) survey responses represent graduates from 11 participating programs. Envision, a new program, did not yet have graduates when the final wave was launched. The response rate of 49.9% is excellent for a web-based survey, suggesting strong engagement among program completers. Participants who completed the survey received a \$30 gift card. (See attached Methodology Report: CRSS Graduate Survey for a detailed description of the methodology.)

Demographics. Survey respondents roughly mirror the demographics of program, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Graduate Survey Respondent Demographics

Race*	N	%	AGE	N	%
AA/Black	71	29.5	18-24	5	2.1
White	136	56.4	25-34	46	19.1
Asian	7	2.9	35-44	71	29.5
Alaska Native	4	1.7	45-54	54	22.4
Hisp/Latino Ethnicity	33	13.7	55 & up	64	26.6

*Participants selected all that apply

Program Support. Each program provided a standard package of supports available to all students, as well as additional supports on an as needed basis. Survey participants were asked to indicate the supports they received while in the program. The most frequently reported supports were tuition, books and fees; internship stipends; and Illinois Certification Board exam fees, all of which were part of the standard package required by the program grant.

Table 4: Program Supports

SUPPORTS	N	%
Student tuition, books, and fees	192	79.9
Illinois Certification Board (ICB) fees	185	76.8
General technology needs (e.g., laptop, tablet, hotspot, etc.)	144	59.8
Stipends for the internship	224	92.9
Professional clothing, or funds for clothing for the internship	101	41.9
Childcare	20	8.3
Transportation and/or transportation funds (including parking, bus passes, etc.)	114	47.3
Employment support	65	27
Housing support	8	3.3
Educational counseling, advising, and transfer support	66	27.4
Mentorship (e.g., interviewing skills, support developing resumes/other documents, etc.)	112	46.5
Legal support to address barriers to employment related to criminal history or citizenship	25	10.4
Substance use counseling or support groups (e.g., peer support groups, AA/NA, etc.)	40	16.6
Access to student health and mental health services	62	25.7
Other, please specify	12	5.0
<i>Professional resources; cohort alumni group; class recordings, emails, CE opportunities; overall amazing support</i>		

Many participants also reported receiving laptops, transportation funds, mentorship, and assistance with professional clothing. Several participants also reported receiving legal assistance, housing support, and student health/mental health services.

Overall, participants generally agreed (with a few exceptions) that program staff were supportive when they experienced challenges or needed accommodation. Specifically, among those who experienced challenges, 161 (83%) agreed or strongly agreed that program staff were supportive. Further, among those that needed accommodation, 188 (86%) indicated staff were supportive. Several students commented that instructors and staff offered support and guidance and were available to answer questions, assist with resolving internship issues, and listen to students' concerns and struggles. They also indicated they appreciated instructor flexibility when students had special needs.

Credentialing Exam. Ninety-seven (39.4%) respondents reported they had taken the credentialing exam, and 76 (78.4%) reported having passed the exam. The majority (77) (79.3%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the program had prepared them for the exam. One respondent who did not pass the exam indicated they felt the curriculum did not match the test. Several others mentioned that the problem scenario format of the exam questions was challenging, they did not learn about Individual Placement and Support (IPS) or WRAP in the CRSS Success program, and they would have liked more motivational interviewing training.

Working in CRSS/CPRS role. At the time of completing the survey, 133 (55.2%) respondents were working in a CRSS or CPRS role. Twenty-two (20.4%) others indicated they had worked in the CPRS/CRSS role since completing the program but discontinued. Reasons for leaving their CRSS/CPRS role included too many or too few hours, the pay offered was too low, the work environment was stressful, and finding different or better job opportunities.

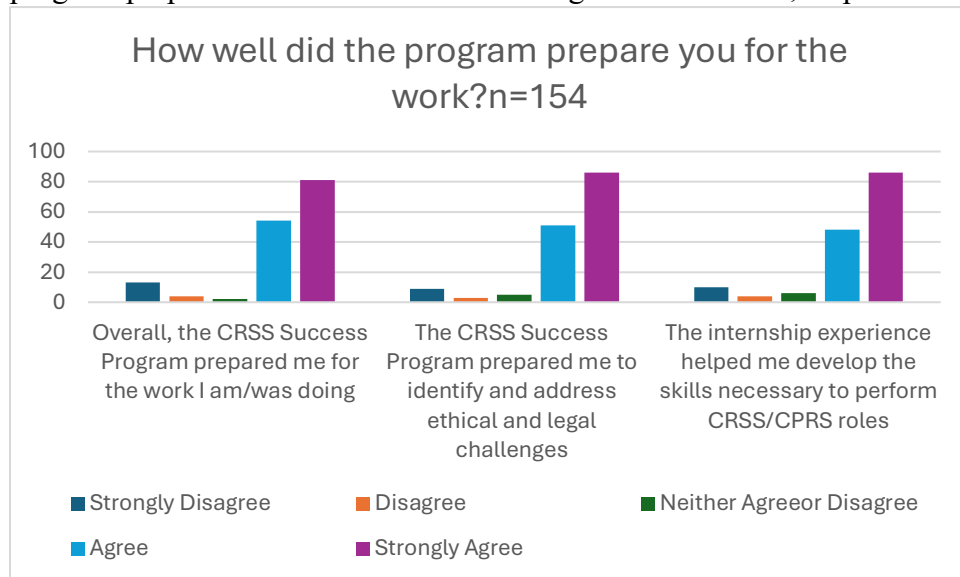
Those who reported never working in a CPRS/CRSS role identified factors that prevented them from doing so including not having applied for any CRSS/CPRS positions; not being offered positions that they applied for; the pay offered being too low; schedule conflicts; working in the field in a different role; and health/mental health concerns or family obligations that prevented them from pursuing a position.

How many hours a week are/did you working in the CRSS/CPRS role n=155	N	%
1-16 hours	22	14.2
17-30 hours	31	20.0
31-40 hours	69	44.5
More than 40 hours	33	21.3
What is/was your hourly rate of pay in the CRSS/CPRS role? n=155	N	%
Less than \$7.99	2	1.3
Between \$8.00 and \$12.99	3	2.0
Between \$13.00 and \$17.99	23	15.1
Between \$18.00 and \$22.99/hour	95	65.2
Between \$23.00 and \$27.99/hour	26	17.1
\$28/hour or more	3	2.0
What is the primary behavioral health area you are/were working in? n=155		
Mental health services	38	24.5
Substance use services	32	20.6
Both mental health and substance use services	85	54.8
What is/ was the population(s) you are/were working with? n=155		
Children & adolescents	25	16.1
Adults	149	96.1
Women	54	34.8
Families	33	21.3
Justice involved	37	23.9
What type of setting are/were you working in? n=155		
Inpatient	10	6.5
Outpatient/community	41	26.5
Residential	25	16.5
Crisis/Living Room	38	24.5
School/Education	2	1.3
Living Room/Drop -in Center	6	11.6
Recovery Community Organization	13	8.4
Other, please specify : Faith-based programs, NAMI,	26	16.8

Table 5. Employment Hours, Pay, Population and Setting

As shown in Table 5, the number of hours per week worked and hourly rate of pay varied among respondents who had or were working in a CRSS/CPRS role, with the majority working more than 30 hours per week earning between \$18 and \$22.99 per hour.

Those who were working or had worked in a CRSS/CPRS role were asked about how well the program prepared them for the work. As Figure 1. illustrates, respondents (with a few exceptions),



strongly agreed that the program prepared them for the work and to identify and address ethical challenges. Similarly, they agreed or strongly agreed that the internship experience helped them develop the skills needed for work as a CRSS/CPRS.

Figure 1.

When asked what was most rewarding about working in a CRSS/CPRS role, participants shared that using their lived experience to help others and being able to make a difference was very rewarding. The comments below illustrate some of their experiences:

When you see a guest walk in troubled in some way, and when they leave, you see they feel some relief. The connection and community and learning that with my lived experience, I can provide the HOPE that everyone needs through my encouraging words/support. YOU CAN DO ANYTHING!

Having the chance to share the message of hope that there is something better in this life than the struggle the person maybe going through.

...I work with a lot of recovery support instilling hope and attaching them to resources or networking with them and just seeing the light come back on their eyes and the Hope from somebody coming alongside of them is huge. The gratitude that they express through our working together fuels my heart.

The most rewarding part of working in a CRSS/CPRS role has been the profound impact I've been able to make on the lives of those in recovery. One of the most fulfilling aspects is seeing the transformation in individuals as they progress on their recovery journey. Being able to share my own experiences and provide hope to others has been incredibly empowering.

Using my life experience that previously seemed negative and useless to help others

I am very grateful for this opportunity of a lifetime. It has helped me overcome the barriers of employment due to my criminal history and drug charges on my background. But thank you to this program. I am able to use these hangups to help others find hope.

I love this program. It has helped me become more established and I now get to work in a field I enjoy. The CRSS program set me up for this success by helping with offsetting cost of technology and education needs. I will always support and promote the CRSS program.

Finally, 195 (81%) survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they saw themselves working in a CRSS/CPRS role 12 months from now.

DISCUSSION

The CRSS Success program continues to enroll students and support them to program completion. To date, 1270 students have enrolled and 576 have completed the program. Evaluation findings related to those who discontinued the program prior to completion suggest that students without any prior college or trade school experience may benefit from additional support. Among program completers, 22 percent have passed the certification exam. Our survey of students indicates that at six months post-graduation, 31 percent have passed the certification exam and 75.6 percent are working or have worked in a CRSS or CPRS role. Students and program staff are very positive about the opportunities and supports that the program provides. Several concerns emerged that have also been discussed at the CRSS Success Learning Collaborative. These include the need for more standardization and guidance on program implementation, student difficulty with the format of the certification exam, and the wide range in student readiness for academic and professional work. Overall, the program has been successful in enrolling students, supporting them through the program, and preparing them to work in CRSS and CPRS roles.

Attachments

NORC Findings Report

NORC Methods Report