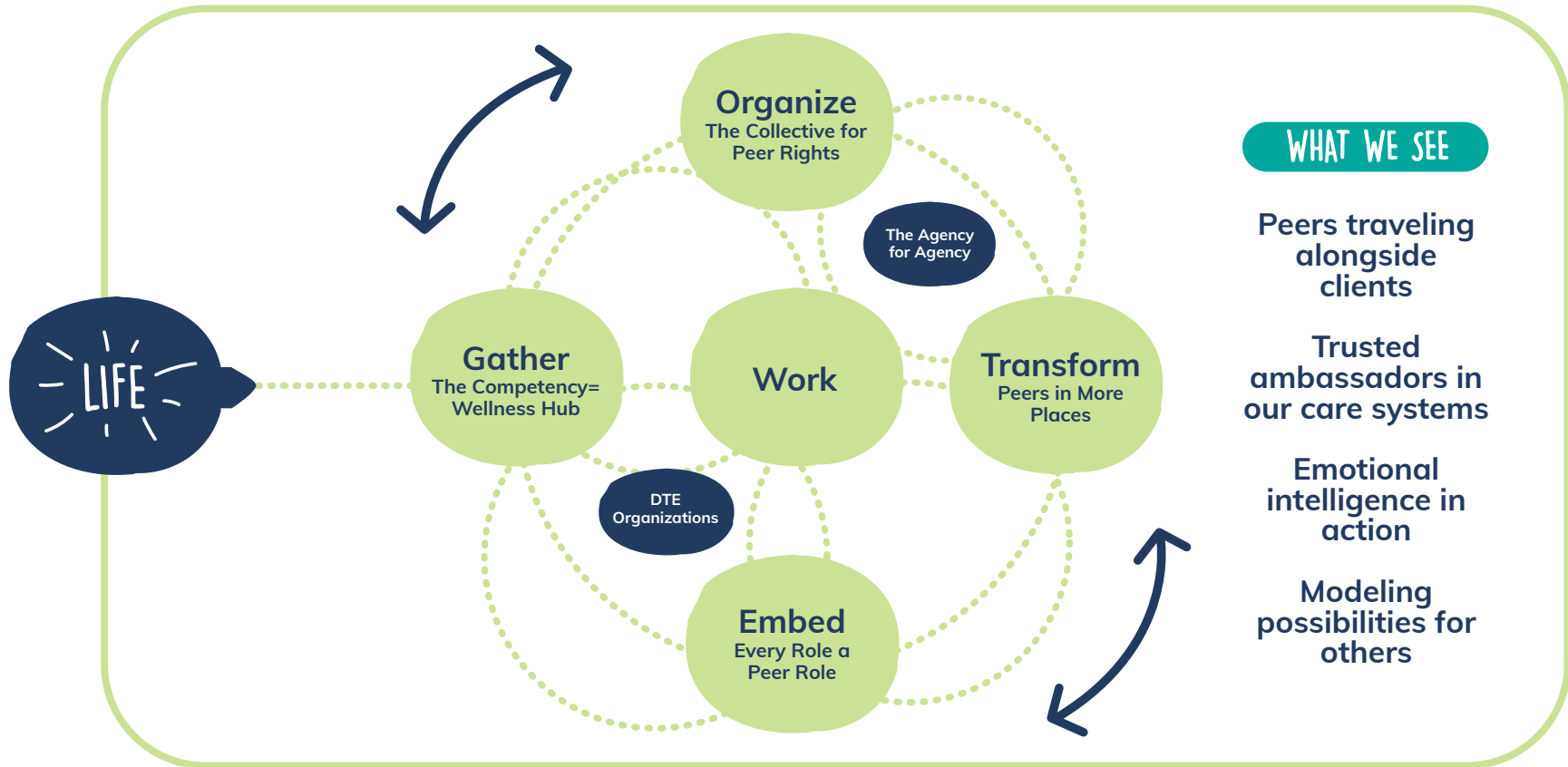


LIVED EXPERIENCE @ WORK: A NEW PEER EMPLOYMENT PIPELINE

Building on what we heard about Peer* employment today and recommendations for a better future, we explored with Peers and key stakeholders ways to maximize the talents and unique contributions of the Peer workforce while respecting choice, fairness and well-being.



*In this project, 'Peers' reflect the variety of roles across organizations that bring a deep understanding of and expertise about the lived experience of those supported by an agency, formally or informally. We recognize that organizations and Peers use and prefer a variety of different terms to describe roles that centre a person's lived experience.

THE FUTURE: IMAGINING A NEW PEER EMPLOYMENT PIPELINE

► Gather: The Competency=Wellness Hub

The Concept

A central location for job postings, training, readiness, and supports for people finding and getting work. This model recognizes the integrated nature of competency building and wellness – that as people develop competencies, and confidence with these competencies, they support both clients, teams and themselves when applying these competencies. The Hub offers training for Peers of all types, at all stages of the employment journey. It also offers mental health and wellness supports, by Peers and for Peers.

- “Having a resource to use to find out about what’s available for clients would be helpful, rather than just having to Google yourself when you don’t have time to do this searching.”
- “There’s stuff out there that Peers could use to enhance skills and resumes that they may not know about.”

Emphasis is on competency building, understanding what’s next on the employment journey, and accessing safe and appropriate wellness supports. The Hub brings together the best of what organizations are offering Peers and broadens access for organizations and Peers.

Potential Impact

- **Access to employment opportunities and future-focused career planning for Peers.** Showing the possibilities of work in the Peer sphere and helping Peers discover new roles that are available.
 - “Would be helpful to have a central source of info around Peer work and training opportunities.”
 - “Years back, CAMH had a consumer survivor bulletin. Don’t believe that’s still going on. Used to get in my email – very helpful resource, would list opportunities available in the community.”
 - “Biggest obstacle is knowing they are there.”
- **Opportunity for Peer-to-Peer mentorship and wellness support.** Using a ‘buddy system’ or other model, Peers have the opportunity to connect, share experiences, and support and learn from each other. Formal mentorship programs have been successful in many instances, and more opportunities to offer them could be beneficial.
 - “[Organization] has a mentor role – someone outside of organization who can come in and support harm reduction support workers AND people who are supervising. Has worked well.”
- **Resilience and mental wellness before and while actively doing Peer work.** The Hub can act as a central resource for support when dealing with common challenges (i.e. managing boundaries, coping with grief and loss) and can mobilize culturally competent and appropriate resources as envisioned by Peers.
 - “Used experiences as something that motivates me to move forward.”

- “I’m a resilient person. I was super busy but used experience in a positive way. Kept me busy, distraction from feeling alone.”
- “[Peers] are more susceptible to being continuously re-traumatized through the work from the loss and lack of adequate supports that they’ll likely experience daily.”

- **Expanded no-barrier training to build competencies and confidence:** The Hub centralizes training that should: be tailored to Peer roles; incorporate Peer input; be ongoing; explore a variety of topics; and present opportunities to include clients (i.e. future potential Peers). This would create opportunities to harmonize trainings across organizations, when appropriate. Lots of training examples and existing resources could be built in and built upon – sharing what’s out there and filling in training gaps and capacity limitations.

Potential Challenges

- Would organizations continue to support Peers while in the workplace? How can we ensure that the hub is complementary to healthy workplaces and accountability for Peer wellness is not transferred to Peers?
- What would oversight and infrastructure look like to maintain a positive and constructive hub environment?

Early Reactions from Peers

- “Would be good to actually see if there are Peer jobs that are out there in the same field (i.e. addictions).”
- “I can’t think of any organization that would have all of that stuff. Some have employment and career counselling but don’t have mental health counselling aspect.”
- “Have something central that’s divided into different types of Peers depending on the needs of the community. Areas need

a lot of work, a lot of training depending on where Peer wants to be.”

- “I would start off with a drop in space where people can connect with each other, because that’s one of the most powerful ways of learning about what’s going on and learning from each other.”
- “Find good training wherever it is that might pertain to how do you do your job better going into a Peer role? Also training for managers – how do you manage Peers when you’re not one yourself? It’s tough.”

► Principles of mental wellness supports and resources for Peers: Need-to-Knows

- **Diverse:** Supports need to be easy to access, in multiple formats and people need a choice since different supports work for different people. This could be a variety of 1:1 support sessions, group sessions, external and internal options, Peer-to-Peer groups, formal sessions, and informal networks. Some organizations find it is important to separate mental health support from supervision, and relationships with co-workers and work with someone external. Drop-in hours and flexible ways to access the services are important.
- **Accessible and available:** Currently, limited mental health supports exist for Peers but the onus is on them to seek them out themselves. Navigating these services should be simpler. Some people may require technology or other infrastructure for access.
- **Ongoing relationships:** Conversations need to be regular (i.e. every 2 months). Many Peers we spoke with found it

helpful to have one person (or multiple people) they could turn to for mental health support and advice about work situations. Whether this is a friend, family member, supervisor or therapist. Holding forums and setting clear expectations for attendance, staff involvement, and frequency of supports can also be meaningful.

- **Sustainably funded and structured:** Regular, ongoing, and stable funding to offer internal and external supports is important. Access to benefits, EAPs and supports outside of formal benefits and EAPs should be explored. The provider doesn't have to be an insurance company and instead could be a "local community health clinic." Ideally, this structure should also provide a chance to access other health services, like dental care. Extending temporary services during COVID-19 to become more permanent (i.e. free psychotherapy, mental health workshops) could be a good starting point.
- **Specific programming:** We heard that targeted programs and support for mental health, addictions, self-care, grief, loss, and counseling are important.

"If we invest money in that, people will be good workers, comes back to us that much more."

► Work: The Agency for Agency

The Concept

A centralized place for organizations to go to hire Peers offering specific services, offering more flexibility and control for Peers.

The structure, analogous to a consulting firm or agency, changes the dynamic as organizations hire an outside consultant instead of a 'Peer'. This change could impact what they can pay, change who employs Peers (potentially through the City of Toronto), and could create opportunities for organizations to become 'members,' paying into the model to get services back.

- "In the future, I want to be employed on a team of Peers, working in a dedicated office or centre for Peers that employs Peers working in a number of areas like HIV and housing... this is my dream."

Working with the Agency could offer a great opportunity for Peers who are interested in longer term work, advancing their career in related sectors, and translating other skills and experiences into Peer work. It can also help broaden perceptions of what a Peer can do as there will be many skills on offer.

The Agency can put safeguards in place to protect workers, creating guidelines for hiring a team of Peers or facilitating Peers within a network, so Peers don't end up isolated in an agency. The Agency may also offer trainings to organizations that further reinforces the value of lived experience at work, including culturally appropriate and meaningful trainings for Peers and others.

Potential Impact

- **Enhance flexibility and value of Peer work:** The centralized structure can help ensure that Peer roles are not belittled and infantilized, treated as separate from other staff, excluded or undervalued – a common experience today. Embedding respectful language, such as 'Community Consultant', and ensuring Peers are paid accordingly can create better standards for respecting the contributions of Peers in the

workplace. In community activism conversations, there are critiques of the notion of Peer workers as a way to maintain hierarchical employment structure. The Agency creates structure so that the essential services provided by Peers are respected, valued, remunerated and offered benefits for work in the social field.

– “I am putting in the hours and effort full time people are, but not being paid in same way.”

- **Create affiliation with Peers and Peer work – not an organization:** Intentional non-attachment to an individual organization offers Peers more control over their career path. Recognizing that affiliation with a specific organization is really important to some Peers, there may be ways to incorporate this flexibility into the model so that Peers can participate while choosing an affiliation or employment structure that best suits their needs.
- **Enhance autonomy:** Creating a culture of role choice, the Agency ensures Peers are not relegated to the one Peer role available in an organization because of funding constraints. Allowing people this choice is important to determine where there is the most mutual value.
- **Create new job roles:** Jobs could be developed for Peers to train organizations on how to work respectfully and collaboratively with Peers and others with lived experience. An internship style process with support could also create pathways for Peers to learn new skills and find stable employment within the Agency.

- **Establish new wellness models:** The Agency, as a collective, could have more opportunity to create its own EAP and/or selection of wellness supports by both Peers and professionals, including mental health. It would be particularly well positioned to offer navigation supports given that many clients navigate across multiple organizations.
- **Streamline the funding process:** Supported by a multi-organization grant submission, the Agency can relieve the burden of grant submissions at the organizational level through direct funding or another process. Currently, many Peer roles are grant funded through labour-intensive applications that must be completed annually. There are also huge inequities between the amount of Peer funding that different organizations receive and are able to access.
 - “There’s inequity with other organizations that don’t have fundraising.”
 - “That’s unfortunate that... organizations don’t work together. One piece of the funding pie, everyone takes a slice.”
- **Encourage new partnerships:** More opportunities to partner between organizations doing similar work and collaborative programs (building on successes of multi-agency programs) can be established.
 - “If we’re looking to increase our Peer compliment, we usually communicate with our partner agencies. Most of our partners are under contract to receive naloxone kits. Whenever we’re looking for Peers we connect with our partners and we share Peers.”
 - “Partnered with community groups who may not have the resources but they have the clients, so we’ve partnered with them historically.”

Potential Challenges

- What are the consequences of 'looser ties' between organizations and Peers? Does this loss of affiliation matter to Peers? Is their ability to transition into non-Peer roles limited in any way?
- What are the incentives required for organizations to reach out to an Agency versus (re)distribute work internally? What would be required for this model to make the lives of organization leaders easier?

Early Reactions from Peers

- “With this...agency, people could control their own schedule. When I first started in my own sobriety, I didn't want a 9-5 job because I wasn't ready for it.”
- “A lot of people have difficulties with low-income and they have skills they can bring into the community but they don't have the opportunity. In the future, depending on how it's working, could be implementing other things.”
- “A lot of places you don't know what they offer before you go in there... Having the menu that shows the services offered, this is what we can offer.”
- “An organization could come and ask questions: How do we do this? How are other people doing this?”

► Organize: The Collective for Peer Rights

The Concept

Addressing roadblocks experienced by Peers, especially related to pay and equity, The Collective is a self-organized movement to create a union or comparable structure for Peer work (or within an existing union, where applicable). The Collective would take a

coordinated approach and build consensus through conversation. Peers lead the way in addressing the harms and roadblocks they experience first-hand in the workplace and advocate for specific standards and changes. This approach could also work as a multi-organizational collective across the DTE.

The emphasis of the Collective is fairness in employment, which includes:

- Equal pay for Peers doing work that is the same or more difficult than other colleagues
- Benefits that reflect the risk they take on at work everyday
- Training and support that is trauma-informed
- Pathways to education and promotion
- Opportunities to influence change in the workplace

It is beyond the scope of this project to understand the depth of collective agreement negotiation but this idea emerged as a way to address challenges reconciling Peer roles in a unionized workplace. We heard:

- “If we are able to create a model around the Peers, we would be in a better position (in a coordinated way) to introduce these individuals into our collective agreements that can explain their value to the agency without having them covered by the collective agreement. Their role and value would be better understood within our sector and then be more acceptable.”
- “It's complex. Many of us work with a union and that adds a whole other layer. To compensate or not compensate presents an issue for the union. Should [Peers] be covered as staff? Or, choose not to compensate and then not valuing their contribution. Also, the issue of honoraria or per diem is often not sufficient. Over time they look like someone who should have been paid as a consultant or an employee.”

Potential Impact

- **Address equal pay roadblocks for Peers:** Since there is a lack of funding and social insertion models, Peers are often trained and supported rather than hired and enabled to support themselves. Collective action can help mitigate harms of existing Peer models and explore other forms of support and compensation that would improve the quality of the work experience, like transit fares, meals, and insurance to protect Peers while on the job.
 - “[Peer roles] can be a Catch 22 – best intentions and worst impact on marginalized people because we’re doing it with no funding.”
 - “If [Peer work] was something I could get benefits through, I would have liked to but I need to stay on my medications, these medications aren’t cheap. I enjoyed working, I do miss working. People say, ‘Are you coming back? We miss you.’ It’s nice to hear I was appreciated when I was there.”
 - “That’s a problem because it’s casual and it’s not reliable and I would like to do the work, but I think it’s very important...this income is not sufficient and is irregular.”
- **Address equal pay roadblocks for employers:** The majority of organizations we spoke with would like to be able to pay Peers more (a living wage) and many mentioned wanting to be able to hire more Peers. A standardized model of Peer roles could articulate their value for clients and organizations, and support changes to restrictions on the use of Peer funding. For example, the City of Toronto limits how much Peers can be paid with City funding.
 - “If we had more money, [Peers] would be getting paid as professionals.”
 - “Funding is the main barrier. We want to pay people more. It has gotten better over time but it’s still not enough.”
- “I want to advocate for appropriate wage for Peer workers. We have a Peer who runs workshops and works one-on-one at this time. We had funding for a Peer but it was only one year’s funding.”
- “We want to allow someone who is a Peer to enter into our workplace and allow them to put together a body of work that allows them to have a more secure financial future.”
- “We were told: ‘You need to stop all your Peer programs; they don’t have coverage with workers compensation... and what happens if they get injured on the job?’”
- **Advocate for policy changes that address bureaucratic violence and system flaws:** Policy changes are needed so people don’t get punished for trying to get employment. Organizations noted that taking on Peer work can jeopardize drug coverage, ODSP, OW, and other life-saving supports. Honorariums, gift cards, and other creative workarounds are made by organizations – but lack of standardization and documentation often leaves Peers paid less and unfairly puts their own service access, medications, and housing at risk, leading to intentionally precarious employment and lack of job protection.
 - “We need to make a big deal about the kind of harm that this poorly defined system is creating. I don’t know if it is spoken about a lot?”
 - “In HIV – living on ODSP guarantees them uninterrupted medication; precariously insured folks who are on Trillium. Depending on how they access the system they’ll have to pay 4 months of a deductible upfront. Trillium is a broken system.”
 - “Some choose to work as Peers to maintain disability benefits. Not that they couldn’t be in other types of employment. May choose to stay in precarious employment to keep benefits.”

– “Don’t want people permanently impoverished, but if people are on social assistance, need to make sure it doesn’t impact their benefits.”

- **Stabilize employment, rights, and income:** The Collective could navigate regulation changes and set up standards that protect Peers’ livelihoods, financial stability, and well-being.
 - “Some changes to legislation for labour laws over the last couple years and we’ve been put under a microscope; before we could negotiate with ODSP and CPP but with the labour laws changing the definition of a ‘worker’ changed and whether you make two dollars or two million dollars you’re considered a worker.”
 - “Hard to keep track of two sets of benefits, two sets of rules. The onus is put on the individual. [If I’m] making \$15/hour, 15-25 hours per week, it adds up to be too much.”

Potential Challenges:

- What are the pitfalls and risks of collective action within a disorganized and diverse Peer employment system? Are differences between Peers and their situations likely to split, rather than unify, a Collective?
- Who might lead the way to getting a Collective off the ground and how will they be compensated? How much early effort is involved for a potential pay-off down the road?

Reflections on Employment Law

Throughout this project, we learned about workarounds and adaptations organizations may use to ensure Peers can work with their teams. There are legal obligations employers need to meet to follow employment laws. It is beyond the scope of this

project to address these issues, but we recognize that these laws create additional considerations and limitations for organizations employing Peers.

► Embed: Every Role a Peer Role

The Concept

Every member of an organization is valued for the lived experience they bring to their work, and there are no ‘Peers.’ Education and work experience remain relevant, but not more than lived experience connected to the mission and mandate of the organization.

Embedding strategies for mobility across all roles in an organization, this model is similar to how we think about women and work or other examples of anti-discrimination and pro-integration initiatives.

A lived-experience-first approach to recruitment might include:

- Scenario- and storytelling-based interviews intended to uncover lived experiences and how this experience can be applied to the work of the organization
- Mobilizing and empowering clients to have an active role in recruitment decision making
- Embedding Peers in Human Resource processes to catalyze a shift to valuing lived experience in all roles

This person-centred approach to employment extends the value of lived experience demonstrated by Peers to the entire workforce of an organization.

Potential Impact

Reduce tokenism: Prioritizing lived experience in some roles, but not all, can lead to the perception that lived experience is *instead of* other qualifications – and that as long as someone has some lived experience, we can ‘check that box’.

- “We need to move away from the Peer labour which is stigmatizing... It’s not because you have lived experience, it’s because you have skills. We ask Peers to sit on a committee and represent everybody with lived experience.”

Eliminate Peer-related ceilings: Advancement opportunities and barriers would not be connected to lived experience alone, or to implicit and explicit stigmas that Peers face in relation to their lived experiences. Instead, we would value and treat employees with a range of different experiences as equals.

- “It builds the room for the individual to say ‘I’m here because I meet the job description’ vs saying ‘I’m this’ or ‘I’m that.’”

Improved services and outcomes: Deep understanding of clients, a sense of shared experience and knowledge at all levels in an organization can influence strategic planning and program development, as well as day-to-day service delivery. Embedding lived experience within every role ensures that programs and services will be meaningfully influenced by those who have or need to use them – and helps people along their individual recovery journeys.

- “I can’t keep it if I don’t give it away, so I share strength and hope with people who are struggling.”
- “This is what I was doing, this is what happened, got connected, now my life is this. I’m not there to preach, just there to share my experience.”

Reduce stigma attached to qualifications and credentialing:

This approach creates room for different qualifications and credentials to be fairly considered, and expands definitions of requirements to be used when hiring.

- “Who becomes the arbiter, who says you qualify or you don’t?”
- “Credentialism is a big issue. How can we push back and advocate against this notion or version of credentialism? A lot of our people are highly skilled and could improve many systems. How do we leverage that having knowledge of different cultures is more valuable?”

Better representation: Increasing the value and necessitating lived experience, including experiences of race and racism, ethnicity and cultures, and other identities can help create more diverse organizations, at all levels, including leadership, staff, Peers, board members, etc.

- “People need to see reflection of themselves, otherwise it sends the message that they don’t really care.”

Potential Challenges

- How would this approach work for people who prefer to maintain privacy around some or all lived experiences? Can we create recruitment processes that surface the competencies associated with many Peer roles but also allows for sharing at all comfort levels?
- Is there a need for new structures to plan and oversee this type of transition at the organizational level? How might a cohort of organizations transition together and be supported by the system in this endeavor?

► Transform: Peers in More Places

The Concept

Discussions about Peer work surfaced ideas about Peers in other spaces, and how Peer work can be the 'solution' to overcoming employment barriers for many people. How are other services, sectors and roles mobilizing lived experience within communities to better support communities? Through expanded partnerships and definitions of Peer work, we can extend the best of Peer employment models to improve client experiences and Peer employment journeys. Poverty reduction initiatives and newcomer integration, in particular, were top of mind.

Potential Impact

- **Improving newcomer experiences:** Integrating Peers in the settlement journey can help support newcomers through crucial social connections, preventing isolation and helping them find opportunities, training, and jobs. A pre-employment program could help Peers and new immigrants become acclimatized through entry level positions in social service agencies, providing access to networks, computers, and other resources that may present barriers to people.
 - “People need opportunities, provide them...many people study but don't have opportunities to apply their experience.”
 - “Even if you don't have these [language or cultural] barriers, the system is difficult to navigate. Imagine if you have them
 - not knowing how to navigate or search for information.”
 - “I got so-called Canadian experience and was able to apply for and get jobs – research, Peer navigator, Peer leader.”

- **Improving and implementing social insertion models to advance people out of poverty:** Breaking the cycle of poverty by integrating Peers in new roles and new opportunities.
 - “Where are the opportunities to advance people out of poverty?”
 - “[Now we have a] social insertion program, but we call it a job but we pay people less.”

Where else can you imagine Peers transforming our systems?

Potential Challenges

- How do we approach organizations or industries that might be culturally resistant to Peers? What are the internal conditions required to start integrating Peers in other sectors? Are they the same as we've heard here?
- What is required to establish and track consistency and fairness across a broader network of Peers and Peer roles? How do we bring an equity and human rights lens to ensuring non-discriminatory practices in more Peer spaces?