DOWNTOWN EAST PROJECT

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LIVED EXPERIENCE @ WORK:
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONS

We talked to Peers* and key stakeholders about the range of roles for people with lived experience in Toronto's Downtown East, and identified recommendations for what can be done to enhance the employment journey of these workers. The purpose of this project was to understand current and potential Peer roles grounded in the experience Peers have now, and wish to have in the future.

This is a summary of recommendations for organizations to take on now, in the coming months, and further in the future to improve the outcomes of the Peer workforce and the clients they serve.

*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.

HEALTH COMMONS SOLUTIONS LAB

TORONTO

RECOMMENDATIONS

▶ **Improving Employment**

TODAY

Recognize the contributions Peers make to the work of your organization. Recognition should be visible and specific.

Compensate people fairly. Peer programs are underfunded, staff are overworked and their labour isn't respected for the level of expertise they bring to the space.

Consider the title of the role. While 'Peer' may have positive associations for some, it can be laden with (unintended) meaning for others, often separating these workers from the rest of the team. Is this distinction beneficial? If it did make sense at one time, does it still?

Challenge assumptions and over-supervising. Be aware that how we treat Peers in the workplace can lead to further marginalization.

Create a supportive workplace that prioritizes mental health and well-being of employees. Establish guidelines, training, and resources for supportive supervisors and mentorship, with check-ins, positive feedback and reinforcement, and focus on helping people feel valued and appreciated. Unified work environments are essential for longevity and satisfaction in the role. Organizations should be structured to make time for mental health, allow people to talk about burnout or professional issues, and take time away to support their own needs.

- "If you have the right people behind you staff-wise, like a fight breaks out, they're there to support you, I'm happy. If you don't have a good team, you're going to be all messed up."

SOON

Define roles in collaboration with Peers for a higher chance of success. Consider whether clients of your organization have access to Peer roles and how small steps may be part of bringing them into the workforce when opportunities emerge. A graduated entry to the role can set people up for success. Many programs give too much responsibility or set expectations too high, too soon.

- "Understand that Peers have different needs and support them, but balance this with setting expectations and helping people grow. Alleviate the extra stressors."

Expand community recruitment, giving Peers opportunities to get jobs through connections and networks. Partnerships between organizations can help facilitate awareness about opportunities that are available and enable Peers to move between organizations when new or more suitable positions arise. Creating community in programs can help create more interest in positions.

- "To support people in getting the roles they want, roles need to be well advertised both in the community and within the organization, and there needs to be support for people who want to apply. A conversation about what kind of supports would be helpful."

IN THE FUTURE

Incorporate Peers into multidisciplinary teams – but ensure that Peers have other Peers to connect with about the work. There should not be only one Peer.

- "We would like to suggest that it is extremely helpful to have more than one Peer in your program. Being the only Peer can be isolating. Our [Peer] workers continuously comment on how important it is for them to have a team of Peers, to have each other – for support, for validation, for inspiration. And also to keep each other accountable. If your program has the capacity for only one Peer worker, facilitating and encouraging a connection with Peer workers from other programs or agencies might be helpful."

Combat organizational resistance with transparent communications about strategy.

- "People who were already working in the organization were afraid the Peers would take all the jobs because people were thinking, "we're training Peers to do our jobs and then they'll take our jobs!" That was institutional resistance to Peers. Of course that was not the intent and we were hoping to give people some job experience."

Develop clear pathways to bring people back to work. Establish a return-to-work plan once people are stable, to help chart how people can go back. This plan can support Peers who need to temporarily stop working, and can help set shared expectations with Peers, build honesty and transparency, and offer support during time off and afterwards. Plans like these make it clear that it's okay if Peers need time and makes it more likely they'll be supported to take the time they need, when it's needed.

Plan for the future and create conditions for Peers to grow – through more hours, training and education, and more roles/opportunities. Explore social and workplace insertion programs, partnerships with educational institutions, and internship programs for people with lived experiences who are interested in gaining different types of employment experiences. Offer people options so they can pursue a path that works for them.

- "I decided to volunteer and give back. It helped to rebuild my identity."
- "Create a path toward employment. The structure of these processes ultimately sets people up for failure because the jobs are not there in the end."
- "Ideally, there would be an internship-like process with supports – promising people that when they go through this they will get a job."

▶ Building Competencies

TODAY

Recognize Peer competencies, accomplishments, value, and expertise. Support and salute the accomplishment of 'showing up' and learning, and leave room for growth.

- "I got validation that I did the right thing [after handling a challenging mental health situation well]… Even though I had no mental health training, I felt that I knew what to do. I became aware – I'm not afraid of group of people other people might be afraid of."

- "In a world that's so structured, the flexibility of Peer work matters, just be friendly. It doesn't matter if you've seen or know someone, there's an understanding."

Build Peer roles, work, and development proactively into organizational planning. When work opportunities or needs arise, ask yourself: Should this be done by a Peer? Incorporate competency building into strategic organizational planning to enhance capacities and create a positive growth trajectory – for Peers and for the organization overall.
- "The internship model came out of our strategic planning; it is central to our ability to achieve a strategic plan."

Create a hiring process that replicates and reflects the work. Create role and scenario-based interviews to understand how Peers approach different scenarios and work with clients in a non-judgmental way. Include Peers as a part of the hiring process and develop Peer hiring guidelines to promote consistency in job descriptions, pay, etc.
- "Peers are in our HR circle because that's our client base. They vet resumes, [and we're] paying them to be a part of the process."
- "How would it look different if the clients were a part of the hiring panel? That inclusion is also giving that level of training, giving them access to a certain level of space."

Redefine criteria for the work and use a strengths-based approach to identify competencies. Make lived experience the primary qualification for becoming a Peer. Develop and implement less strict criteria for required educational qualifications. Explore these challenges from multiple perspectives, including human resources, labour laws, staff experiences, organization policies, equity, and funding sources. Recognize that tensions exist between the requirements of granting agencies and the need to not stigmatize, union and organization requirements, and Peers and other types of employees.
- "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? Not just having Canadian experience makes you more qualified."
- "Definitions and ways to measure professional equivalency equitably are essential when hiring all staff including Peers; this can be very difficult as we are not measuring education by diplomas or degrees so can by quite arbitrary."
- "I think we need to separate the issue of lived experience, employability, insurance benefits, income support and training. We are making assumptions about who is a good employee and who has challenges…it's not always people identified as a Peer who struggle with employment."

IN THE FUTURE

Mobilize Peer expertise to design and develop programs.
Involve Peers in program (re)design. Collaborate with Peers from the beginning, allowing them to lead research, offer input, design, and set goals to address the needs of clients, rather than being slotted in after the fact.
- "Create the programs and positions for people with lived experiences and allow them to develop and lead programs, simple as that. Success of programs is due to this."
- "Created an advisory board of Peers… [who] designed curriculum, help to facilitate the program, are doing research, conducting focus groups, and offering recommendations on how to improve the program."

Establish supportive boundaries. Some organizations recommend providing supports, particularly for mental health and wellness, from outside of the agency to help set boundaries and maintain confidentiality. This is important, along with a set of clear policies, particularly for Peers who are also accessing services as clients.
- "Clients see you as a staff, but I feel like one of them at the same time. It's kind of weird."

▶ Supporting All Peers

TODAY

Make debriefing a regular part of organizational culture.
Debriefs can happen in different ways, for example, through 1:1s or as a group with a manager. Some organizations have found value in making space for Peer-specific debriefs without leadership present. Support supervisors to engage in this practice, whether they are involved in debriefs directly or not. Teams may also benefit from external debriefing support. Often debriefing happens in an unstructured way – doing it is more important than how it is done.
- "Easy to take it home with you if you don't debrief… you need to take care of yourself to help others. It's important it happens right away [after an incident]."
- "Debriefing is another piece of practicing self-care."

Establish open communication channels and opportunities for Peers to share input on organization decisions. Create the tone that Peers can be open about their experiences, and leave room for organic opportunities to emerge. Consider how clients are responding to programming and reflect on if it would be more effective and/or meaningful for them to receive services from Peers.
- One Peer described a work environment with many challenging situations, but said it doesn't lead to burnout because they feel supported and respected, and like they can make a difference and influence the services offered to clients.
- "It's all about the clients and going above and beyond for clients; need to create leeway and flexibility to provide good client experience."

SOON

Recognize, elevate, and formalize Peers' career trajectories that fit with their motivations. Support Peers to cultivate networks, think of them when opportunities arise, and offer promotions and job titles that create paths to more opportunities.

- "Networks and relationships were important for her to move along her employment journey, people believing in her."
- "Titles matter. People are told they don't have the Canadian experience. An intern isn't marketable but an administrative officer is and an intake officer is."

IN THE FUTURE

Create clear role descriptions and responsibilities and include accommodations where needed. Understand and be transparent about a given Peer role's purpose with potential hires and the team. Also, when a new need or opportunity arises, think about if a Peer role is a good fit. Why or why not? Differentiate when Peer roles are either employment attached to lived experience or developmental programs to create clarity for all parties. Have ongoing conversations about accommodations and adaptations to support success in these roles.

- "When we hire Peers, they're often very open about medical issues. If you see someone struggling, allow them to take time off and come back. Peers are their own experts. They can tell us what they can and cannot do. For example, availability and hours worked may be good when they start but need to renegotiate hours."

- "People can be triggered by the environment depending on their background and then need to look at other options. Challenge is getting the right fit. You don't want to contribute to unwellness."
- "Some people work two four-hour shifts a week and that's it – others will find full-time and never look back."

▶ Improving Black Experiences in Peer Work*

This is a summary of recommendations made by participants who identified as Black.

TODAY

Create and enforce anti-racism policies. Ensure Black workers are aware of the policies or procedures in place that support their rights in the workplace and ensure these policies are followed in practice. Demonstrate what it looks like to see these policies and procedures in action (i.e. What happens when someone reports racism and/or discrimination in the workplace? – there needs to be clear and definitive action in support of the Black Peer). Black Peers experience people who are nice to their faces – then turn on them, often using race and racism to justify their actions. This creates an environment where some

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* We recognize there are organizations that are led by, and serve, Black communities in the DTE. These recommendations are intended for organizations that serve both Black and non-Black clients as well as hire Black and non-Black Peers.

are unable to trust what is said and organizations, teams, and supervisors need to offer stability in the face of this uncertainty.

- "Tell people it's inappropriate, set boundaries."

Start a dialogue about race and racism. Create opportunities for ongoing conversations about race and racism that centre Black experiences. Acknowledge that these conversations are challenging – conversations often get shut down because of hurt feelings, leaving the underlying issue unaddressed. Initiatives should go beyond talking to tangible supports and policy changes to support Black Peers.

- "People who aren't Black resort to crying, weaponizes what they are experiencing."
- "Safe space is knowing it's okay to say something, navigate through it... If we're not saying anything, it's because we don't feel safe."
- "How long are we going to keep talking? We've been talking for so long."

SOON

Design training and programming with Black Peers and test how they translate across race and ethnicity lines. Involve Black Peers in designing services and programs from the beginning. Peers should not need to adapt to supports that weren't designed for them. Embed honouring, celebration and recognition of Black people and culture in the organization. Consider how Black culture can be respected and celebrated beyond Black History Month and other ways that may read as performative and obligatory.

- "People are not familiar with what you go through, [so they] write up things that are not for you."
- "There's still things I experience as a Black woman that others don't understand. Not because it isn't there, they have the privilege of not having to listen."

IN THE FUTURE

Make diverse hiring decisions – beyond Peers. Hire African, Caribbean, Black and other People of Colour into Peer roles and other roles throughout the organization, and support them in their roles and leadership development. Clients need to see reflections of themselves at all levels, it sends a message that the organization/program cares about them as whole people. Recognize the diversity that exists within Black communities and seek to reflect that diversity in your hiring and be thoughtful about hiring and supporting groups of Black Peers.

- "Being able to walk into an organization, I represent someone who looks like them."
- "Hire people based on qualifications, give them a fair chance."
- "If it's one or two Black people, pits us against each other."

▶ Improving Indigenous Experiences in Peer Work*

This is a summary of recommendations made by participants who identified as Indigenous.

TODAY

Make spaces and Peer roles more inviting for Indigenous Peers. Offer the conditions to explore and share cultures and be creative. Make visible signs that you welcome Indigenous peoples into the space, including statements of welcoming, land acknowledgments, etc. It should be clear upon entry that Indigenous people are valued in Peer recruitment processes but also overall organizational culture. Advertise Peer roles broadly in the community and within client circles to support people in getting the roles they want – and provide support for people who want to apply. Hire based on what people have to offer – take a look at what skills and knowledge people have and how it might support the community of clients being served.

- "Hire people to come in and teach skills they are good at like snowshoes."
- "There were particular roles that needed to be filled, decided they could be filled well by Peers based on skill sets."

* We recognize there are organizations that are led by, and serve, First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities in the DTE. These recommendations are intended for organizations that serve both Indigenous and non-Indigenous clients as well as hire Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peers.

SOON

Create opportunities for Peers to try new things and connect in new ways. Recognize the enthusiasm of different people and consider how their skill sets could be applied within the organization. Make space to try something new based on the skills people have. Mobilize technology to create engagements and interactions with Indigenous individuals and communities located in other places. Consider using videoconferencing to support Indigenous Peers and clients with teachings, including connections through or with Indigenous languages across the country.

- "I'm happy that I had the courage to do that. I don't like being on a public platform [but] I'm having fun with that."
- "I just sometimes took it upon myself to help out, do the dishes."

IN THE FUTURE

Prioritize healthy and supportive team dynamics – including culturally-specific supports. Create a collective and collaborative environment amongst Peers to avoid isolation and reduce the impact that this difficult work can take on people. Provide outlets and opportunities to support grieving as a group when death occurs, even just getting people who knew the person together can help. Offer mentorship as a key role and support Peers to not 'take on' too much, including the problems experienced by some clients. Ongoing support surrounding boundary management and wellness should be encouraged.

- "If you don't have a good team, you're going to be all messed up."
- "Recognize the toll that dealing with clients dealing with difficult issues takes."