



DOWNTOWN EAST PROJECT

LIVED EXPERIENCE @ WORK: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CITY

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 the City 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.

Created by Health Commons for the City of Toronto



RECOMMENDATIONS

► Improving Employment

TODAY

Simplify the application process. Reduce the burden and barriers – namely, the time and human resources required – to apply for funding for Peer roles.

Prioritize mental health supports for Peers and staff. Mental health and wellness supports for Peers is the biggest gap. The challenges they face associated with burnout, stress, and direct and indirect trauma are also closely connected to what other staff may be experiencing at work.

SOON

Increase the allowable amount of hourly pay for Peers. Align with the identified range and other competency-based assessments of Peer roles.

Offer more flexibility for funding options and opportunities. Offer flexibility in how to use Peer funding. Money needs to follow the Peer pathway and help people advance over time, and could also be available through education grants for Peers interested in going back to school. Project-based funding is

contentious because it is not sustainable, consistent, or long-term – making it difficult to plan or securely offer employment. The current funding system is restrictive, limited, and lacking. It is a central barrier to hiring Peers.

- “Currently the burden is on organizations to be creative and find ways around this through partnerships and other means.”
- “Do we create a threshold of payment for a person to feel safe, secure, valued and properly compensated? They need to be paid in a different way for 12 months or 2 years to give them the time to project their next steps.”

IN THE FUTURE

Recognize the ongoing need for Peer roles by stabilizing year-to-year funding available. For organizations to fully embed Peers as part of a strategic plan, there should be some predictability in over-year funding for these roles.

Support and/or incentivize career opportunities and development in the role. Build a network to create more Peer work, establishing opportunities to contribute on committees and through research, and the chance to hold positions as employees.

- “The internship and Peer programs are one stop on this trajectory; we have a dreaming and engagement portfolio. What is this path and what are the milestones around it?”

► Building Competencies

TODAY

Invest in key areas of competency building across the Peer workforce. Training supports, funding, and recognition of skill development are important. People gain emotional intelligence, confidence, and empathy through training. Peers feel empowered through their work, helping others in the face of their own struggles, and develop critical soft skills like listening, confidentiality, and decision making in addition to their expert knowledge. Teams and Peers need support to continue developing these skills.

- “We need help with training. We’re not set up as a training organization and it’s not that folks can’t do it but it would just be helpful to have this embedded.”

SOON

Establish support to help Peers navigate the unique challenges they face. Boundaries came up again and again as a challenge. Peers work with people in their Peer and friend groups – often putting them in uncomfortable situations that can lead to distress. Supports are needed to help people identify their own triggers and when they are becoming or feeling unwell.

- “Boundaries [are a] double-edged sword. Sometimes someone needs a friend to coax them and we can’t be their friends. Trying to negotiate that fine line... I can’t do that.”

- “Our Peers identify all the time “Boundaries”; constantly put in situations where they are being asked for something; sometimes they feel torn between the allegiance to Peer work or their community and they don’t want to be perceived as going against that.”

Value the competencies and expertise of Peers with adequate funding. Currently, funding is provided to hire Peers. A paradigm shift could happen if Peers were paid more and paid fairly for their competencies, skills, and contributions.

- “Workers who are hired as they share cultural, gender and language experiences of newcomer and immigrant women; they are unionized and paid on par with outreach workers.”

IN THE FUTURE

Create ongoing opportunities for Peers to influence and impact policies across jurisdictions. Peers understand policies from the dual perspectives of receiving and providing services to clients, and they often have a detailed understanding of system navigation. Improve client experiences across organizations by applying Peer input and learnings. Connect Peer work to the bigger picture so that Peers see how their work fits into the organization and how it supports their mission to support the people in their communities.

- “Understanding how the organization values this role requires commitment. When it works well, it is fostered at all levels.”
- “Why can’t we simplify the intake process (for clients who access services at multiple organizations)?”

► Supporting All Peers

SOON

Create new training, employment, and service opportunities to better equip Peers and enhance services for clients. Fund personal and professional development for different types of Peer roles considering what makes them unique, and explore how training and other investments can make it easier for these roles to effectively meet the needs of the clients. Lack of resources for clients is an ongoing challenge, but the right supports for Peers, broader hiring, and consistent training can help address key service gaps.

- “You have no idea what you’re up against – it helps to be resourceful and curious and aware of community resources that might help people.”
- “They do miss me when I’m not here, even a lot of staff do because I multi-task.”
- “We do not want to “separate” from regular employment process, but we can’t lose sight of the unique conditions surrounding the Peer person.”

IN THE FUTURE

Expand funding flexibility to recognize and support all types of Peer needs. Current funding is usually project-based, rather than sustainable, often meaning it can only be applied to one type of Peer role and won’t adequately meet program needs.

- “Flexibility of how funds are used is needed. Also flexibility in terms of timelines – changes don’t happen just like that. Different communities work differently. Can’t also put a

timestamp on things, takes time to build trust. [That can be different] than what is on workplan, especially if you want to do it right and intentionally.”

- “Challenge to fund programming through TUHF – tend to want to pay people \$15 an hour. Can pose challenges in terms of dynamics. Some organizations can’t supplement – reinforce this. Have to supplement wages or might not be able to do the project.”

► Improving Black Experiences in Peer Work

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

TODAY

Mandate cultural competency and anti-racism training – without putting the burden on Black team members. Cultural competency and anti-racism training are essential and must be approached with a learning mindset and emphasis on listening. Provide Black Peers the opportunity to influence training, but ensure compensation for those who choose to be involved.

- “Consult us and compensate us.”
- “We don’t want to do free labour. This is what we’ve been doing our entire lives.”
- “...Making it aware that it’s not the work of Black people to educate. We’re turned to as the experts, want the people who exhibit it to do the work themselves.”

SOON

Address unequal funding. Review funding patterns – are some programs and organizations consistently getting funding while others are not? Can this be understood through a racial inequity lens? There is vast inequality between organizations and the resources they have to support Peers and Peer programs – this includes between organizations that serve Black communities and those that serve majority white or multi-racial communities. There needs to be a mechanism to correct for this.

- “We, unlike our other community partners, we have a massive fundraiser that raises \$1 million a year...[organizations serving Black communities] don’t have this.”

IN THE FUTURE

Offer exclusive supports for Black Peers. Make available wellness supports that reflect identities and experiences of Black Peers (i.e. easy access to others from Black communities to discuss their experiences with each other and receive expert support from within their community). Recognize that Black Peers who are also newcomers may have a lot of relevant experience that was acquired in other countries – trainings may be more about navigating the Canadian context (a different focus than many other types of training). Create the systems for Black Peers to support the mental wellness of Black clients (and themselves).

- “We need free therapy, most of us can’t afford it.”
- “More workshops are geared towards POC, not specifically for Black women. We get lost in the shuffle. And Black men need their own space too.”

- “I don’t think I have enough resources if someone wants that help. I wouldn’t know where to start if someone asked for Black care...”
- “Mental health for Black [Peers] takes a different toll – we have to deal with different things.”

Dedicate funding to Black Peers and Black community

support. Fund and support planning processes with lots of trust-building time as part of the work – expectations of going too fast may cause further harm to relationships and people. Need to be able to use funding to support Black Peers in emergent, culturally safe ways, which might mean pivoting from original plans that don’t serve the community in practice. Explore how to support the entrepreneurial aspirations of Black Peers – design opportunities to create something new and connect with a range of businesses and organizations to explore the many ways Black Peers can contribute to their communities and be fairly compensated.

- “Offer financial resources with no strings.”
- “Surveying and getting feedback from the community on what their needs are... What is not there that would make your life easier.”
- “Workshops are going better because we created our own.”

► Improving Indigenous Experiences in Peer Work

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

TODAY

Pursue more expansive and stronger partnerships. Create and facilitate more partnerships with multi-ethnic (Indigenous and non-Indigenous, including newcomer) organizations in the community. Make it easier for organizations to collaborate locally to deepen community connections. Support partnerships with educators who share Indigenous cultures with broad communities to engage more Indigenous people in Peer work.

- “I don’t know what the community centre does across the street.”
- “Everyone has something to share.”

SOON

Expand funding and create specific targets for Indigenous support and involvement. Support the design, mobilization and funding for culturally appropriate mental health and wellness supports, including supporting networks of Elders wanting to connect with Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peers and supports available in the languages of preference for Indigenous Peers. Stabilize program funding; currently it is established year-to-year and extended by a few months at a time, never guaranteed. Set targets on employing Indigenous Peers and provide funding to support organizations in achieving these targets.

- “Each Elder possesses a different teaching.”
- “Would be a lot of interest if we could offer more roles...it helps people financially, there are other reasons, but that’s a huge part.”
- “We cannot go on without funding.”

IN THE FUTURE

Create spaces for cultural exchange to deepen connections and understanding. Invest in cultural spaces with Indigenous communities and make them available to everyone. Establish and offer a physical space to host cultural exchange and cultural awareness between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peers across organizations in the DTE. The space should be designed and equipped for food sharing – a key element of cultural exchange – and should support teaching about and practicing culture, together. Continued investment in sharing culture will benefit Peers and the clients they serve.

- “Culturally there have been so many things that Peers have lifted our participants to do because they’re doing it with them.”

Create dedicated resources in support of Indigenous Peer workers. Fund cultural competency teachings and trainings for people working with Indigenous Peers and Indigenous clients. Provide culturally appropriate mental health supports to staff and Peers – including individual and group options, a variety of different professionals (i.e. Elders, artists, counsellors), and staff meetings to talk about self-care. Recognize the unique impact the Canadian history of colonization has had, and continues to have, on Indigenous communities.

- “Peer support workers need help as well, need health psychologically, emotionally.”
- “Was a very difficult experience for me to go to residential and day school...I suffered a lot.”
- “When I got [my] cheque, I cried for 2 days... I thought of the children who didn’t survive.”

Expand training that is specific to the demands of Peer work.

This might include learning or relearning cultural teachings and skills (i.e. beading) as well as other tools to support program delivery, like computer/technology skills. Support ongoing training opportunities to help people stay engaged in Peer work, and find new opportunities (Peer or otherwise). Some Peers have a lot of work experience while others are learning about employment systems, Peer support skills, and cultural identity at the same time.

Emphasize training on job search and navigation skills to equip Peers with the tools and knowledge to talk about and seek work that fits with their goals. Training should focus on getting to know the experiences of clients that may be unfamiliar to Peers since not everyone has the same 'lived experience.'

Examples of training, professional, and personal development that would or has helped already include: computers and technology, creativity and growing your voice, sharing your story, silkscreening, playwriting, storytelling, emotional, spiritual, and cultural healing.

- “[It would be best] if training sessions were made available to help [Peers] acquire skills and knowledge to help them acquire Peer support work.”
- “I’m not very good at making bannock, but someone else is. We all have our gifts that we offer.”