

# POWER ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK:

Mental Health and Substance Use Peers

Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division

OCTOBER 2023



**The Power Assessment Framework is a tool to support organizations in determining power distributions within their workplaces and steps towards co-production.** The definition of co-production the framework adopts is peers and non-peer staff “share power to plan and deliver support together.”<sup>1</sup> In practice, full partnership across the mental health and substance use sectors will require employers to offer peers job security and support their



ongoing participation. The goal is to include peers at every level of decision-making, not merely at one meeting or for the purposes of one program.

Peers are workers who apply their knowledge and experience of mental illness and/or substance use to the performance of their job duties within healthcare, community or social service settings. Non-peer staff are their colleagues whose knowledge and experience are acquired through formalized, indirect methods such as post-secondary education. The framework is intended to support organizations where peer and non-peer staff work together within multi-disciplinary teams to deliver mental health and substance use services.

While job descriptions, employment contracts, and organizational policies sometimes detail the duties and responsibilities of both the peer and employer, the power assessment framework explains what can be used as evidence of equitable working conditions and equal power distribution. The following framework defines and describes these power indicators. It details basic assumptions about the nature of peer work and outlines how to adapt and use the assessment in different contexts.

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1 Slay, J. & Stephens, L. (2013). Co-production in mental health: A literature review. London: new economics foundation.

## POWER INDICATORS:

The indicators have been co-developed with 10 peer workers, who compose the project advisory committee and research team. The process of development included an initial discussion of the conditions that would enable co-production within BC's mental health and substance use sectors, then multiple drafts to work through the challenges of naming and describing power. The research team then piloted the framework by hosting a series of workshops with peer workers at 6 different organizations across the province. The final version incorporates their feedback and attempts to address the realities of assessing power within hierarchal workplaces or under conditions of precarious employment.



The history of peer employment within BC is varied and has developed over time to meet the needs of people living with mental illness and/or substance use. The earliest instance of peer employment i.e., peer support or “a helping relationship between [persons with shared life experience] that promotes respect, trust and warmth”<sup>2</sup> has expanded considerably to include numerous roles that perform a range of duties and hold increasing levels of responsibility. Still, stigma and misunderstandings about the contributions of lived and living experience have created barriers to the full participation of peers within programs, services and systems.

The indicators identified build on one another and illustrate what is needed by peers and required of employers to equalize power within their organizations and larger institutions. The first of which is simple: peers require sufficient income to meet their basic needs and live with dignity. They can only exercise choice, control, and autonomy within their workplaces with a stable foundation. Organizations can foster empowerment and increase peer participation by confirming their basic needs are met, offering benefits that include paid vacation and sick time, and creating working conditions that support goal setting, uphold values, present opportunity and maintain accountability between non-peer staff and peers.

**1 Financial Security** – The employer provides compensation and benefits that provide a regular and sufficient income for peer workers. There should be no delays between completion of work and payment. Some positions may be part-time or casual and may not offer a living wage in and of themselves, but supplement other sources of income such as disability assistance, honorarium or other forms of paid employment. Stability is achieved if and

2 CMHA - B.C. Division Consumer Development Project, (2001). Peer Support: Resource Manual. BC Ministry of Health Services, Adult Mental Health Policy and Mental Health Plan Implementation Division.

when peer workers can maintain safe housing, are food-secure and can practice health management that includes self-care, enduring relationships and community participation.

- 2 Self-determination** – Peer workers have choice and control over their own employment, including job options that encompass a range of duties and durations, the capacity to set and achieve goals, and the professional independence to apply their expertise to their paid work.
- 3 Values Alignment** – Peer workers feel capable and empowered to act according to their values while performing their job duties, interacting with their coworkers and navigating between personal and professional environments.
- 4 Opportunity** – Peer workers are encouraged and provided with the resources to contribute to the design, development, delivery, and evaluation of services and systems. This includes access to physical worksites, technology, training, and decision-making tables. Peers have support to contribute throughout the period of their employment. They are also supported if they wish to progress toward higher levels of responsibility. Such progression opens up positions for new peer workers, creates opportunities for peer mentorship and ensures peers are employed at every level of an organization.
- 5 Influence** – Peer workers can effect change and play a significant role in program and organizational decision-making. Staff understand and recognize the value peers bring. Both staff and senior leadership are accountable to the input peers provide and act on their expertise.

## ASSESSMENT SCALE OVERVIEW

The assessment should be completed by both peer workers and their employers. It should be used to evaluate each position and each worksite. Peers may choose to self-assess their own power and anonymously share their results with their employer. The employer is encouraged to either complete the assessment on their own and compare the results to their peer workers' self-assessment or create a safe space for them to complete the assessment together. There may be situations where peer workers fear the loss of their jobs and decline to fill out the assessment even if their score is anonymous. In this instance, assessments completed by peer workers and employers should be aggregated to remove risk of scores being associated with any one person.

The assessment requires peers/employers (i.e., assessors) to select a rating from 1-5 for each of the power indicators. Each peer position and worksite should be assessed separately e.g., Peer Support Workers who are employed by VCH and work on an ACT team and a mental health ward should complete a separate assessment for each setting. The final score for each position will range from 5 – 25 and reflect their standing within the organization from no power to full power and participation.



## ASSESSMENT SCALE

- 1 The following should be completed by both peer workers and employers. Employers should assess their employment practices to see if they are leading to empowerment for their peer workers (at a minimum of 4 on each scale for each peer position). Peer workers should assess their own experience of power within their workplace.
- 2 Select a rating from 1-5 for each of the power indicators below. Circle the number of your choice.
- 3 **The employer may:**
  - a complete the assessment on their own and compare the results to their peer workers' results, **or**
  - b create a safe space for them to complete the assessment together.
- 4 **Peers may** choose to share their results with their employer anonymously.
- 5 Each peer position and worksite should be assessed separately (e.g., Peer Support Workers who are employed by VCH and work on an ACT team and a mental health ward should complete a separate assessment for each setting).
- 6 The final score for each position should range from 5 to 25.

### Financial Security

1	2	3	4	5
Peers are dependent on an employer(s) that pays them minimally, irregularly or through nominal means such as gift cards. Peers are unable to consistently meet their basic needs.	Peers rely on honoraria or piecemeal payments to supplement another source of insufficient income that requires use of public services to minimally meet basic needs.	Peers receive regular, but minimal income from an employer who offers casual contracts and no benefits. Peers are able to meet their basic needs, but finances are limited and choice is restricted.	Peers receive regular income from an employer who offers part-time or full-time positions that supports them to earn a living wage and offer access to benefits. Peers experience a degree of financial security that is tied to their continued employment.	Peers receive regular and sufficient income that may include wages indexed to inflation, access to comprehensive benefits that include paid vacation and sick time, and union membership (if applicable). Peers are financially secure.

## Self-determination

1	2	3	4	5
Peers feel little to no control over their life circumstances. They spend the majority of their time struggling to maintain employment and earn enough to meet their basic needs.	Peers are able to secure some form of employment, but choice and autonomy are limited and dictated by external factors.	Peers are able to choose their workplaces and manage their job duties, but they still experience limited choice and control within these settings.	Peers have control and choice within their workplaces that allows for self-reflection and goal setting. They have opportunities for growth and development, but these opportunities are limited to their current role. Their control in goal setting outside of this role remains limited.	Peers have complete control and choice. They are able to make decisions at work and set goals for their future.

## Values Alignment

1	2	3	4	5
Peers' actions are dictated by necessity and circumstance. They are unable to identify or apply their own values to the fulfillment of their job duties.	Peers experience a fundamental misalignment between their values and the actions they are required to take to fulfill their job duties.	Peers occasionally experience a misalignment between their values and actions as a result of circumstances arising within their workplaces that they have no power to change.	Peers' job duties align with their values, but they still encounter situations at work that challenge them. There are few opportunities to address and change this.	Peers are able to live value-driven lives and have both the capacity and opportunity to address situations that challenge them.

## Opportunity

1	2	3	4	5
Peers' job duties are narrowly defined and enforced. They are barred from entering workplace facilities or accessing resources that are accorded to other staff.	Peers' job duties are narrowly defined, but they are granted access to the same workplace facilities and resources as other staff. Stigma remains a barrier to greater participation.	Peers' job duties reflect their lived or living expertise. They include access to workplace facilities, resources and capacity-bridging (knowledge-sharing) that supports the co-delivery of services.	Peers' job duties include contributions to the design, delivery and evaluation of services. They are provided with resources and support to complete their duties.	Peers' job duties reflect the principles of co-production and they are supported to participate at decision-making tables. Employers support peers to progress and take on increased responsibilities.

## Influence

1	2	3	4	5
Peers are not given the opportunity to provide input and have no ability to effect change within their workplaces.	Peers are tokenized and asked for input that is not used in decision-making.	Peers are asked for input on a regular basis, but what they say is disregarded if it does not align with decisions already made by non-peer staff.	Peers' input is engaged and acted on at the beginning and throughout, but restricted to certain details or superseded by staff or leadership with higher authority.	Peers are encouraged to lead and engaged at every level within an organization or institution. They co-produce services and systems. An equal partnership is held between peers and non-peer staff.

# POWER ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

<b>Organization:</b>					
<b>Peer Position:</b>					
<b>Period Under Review:</b>	<b>From:</b>		<b>To:</b>		
<b>Name of Assessor:</b>			<b>Title:</b>		
<b>Date of Assessment:</b>			<b>Date of Previous Assessment:</b>		

## SECTION I: IDENTITY LOCATION

People have social identities that shape their use of power or feelings of disempowerment within different areas of their lives. Some identities are privileged and come with unquestioned power and authority. Others are marginalized and lead to forms of oppression. Most people hold a mix of identities that simultaneously privilege and marginalise them depending on the context, but often those identities and their implications remain unacknowledged.

The goal of this exercise is not to assess how privileged or marginalized you are, but bring awareness to the social identities you present with and reflect on how they inform the power dynamics within your workplace.

### Social Identity Map:<sup>3</sup>

Please circle the identity markers that apply to you. The blank field has been left for you to fill in any other identity that you relate to, but has not been listed.



<sup>3</sup> The map used has been adapted from The Centre of Community Organizations.



### Further Reflection:

Please write answers to the following questions. The intention is to investigate how your experiences of privilege and marginalization affect who you are, who you have been, and who you are perceived to be as a peer worker.

- 1** What social identity are you most aware of on a daily basis? What are you least aware of?

- a** What benefits do you get from those identities?

- b** What challenges do you face because of those identities?

- 2** How does your social identity inform your experience of power within the workplace?

## SECTION II: WORKPLACE POWER ASSESSMENT

Please refer to the assessment scale and rate the selected peer position on each of the following indicators:

- 1 Financial Security (circle a number from 1 – 5):**

1	2	3	4	5
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- 2 Self-determination (circle a number from 1 – 5):**

1	2	3	4	5
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- 3 Values Alignment (circle a number from 1 – 5):**

1	2	3	4	5
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- 4 Opportunity (circle a number from 1 – 5):**

1	2	3	4	5
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- 5 Influence (circle a number from 1 – 5):**

1	2	3	4	5
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**Final score:**

## SECTION III: STRATEGIES FOR EMPOWERMENT

Peers and the organizations that employ them should aspire to scores within the 20-25 range, which indicate achievement of co-production or significant progress towards co-production. Any indicator that receives a rating of less than 3 should be addressed: What prevents peers from greater participation? What can the employer do to equalize power?

Please identify areas and strategies for empowerment within each of the listed categories:

### Wages, compensation and benefits (relates to indicators 1 & 2):

*Example: Increase wages to support peer workers to earn a living wage*

### Policies (relates to indicators 2, 3 & 4):

*Example: Align substance use personnel policies with WorkSafe BC guidelines on "fitness-for-duty"*

### Job Description (relates to indicators 3, 4, 5):

*Example: Include "co-design and co-delivery" in job duties and performance objectives*

### Workplace Culture (relates to indicators 4 & 5):

*Example: Invite peer staff to all general staff meetings and team building activities*

### Additional Comments: