

STRATEGIES FOR EMPOWERMENT: Employer Checklist

Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division

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The purpose of this checklist is to match low-scoring power indicators with strategies that help to establish more equal partnerships between peers and their employers. The list is not exhaustive, but intended to support worksites to identify and implement strategies that address specific barriers to participation and empowerment. Each potential strategy has been organized into one of four categories that correspond to the five power indicators outlined in the Power Assessment Framework:

- 1 Wages, compensation and benefits**
- 2 Policies and Process**
- 3 Job description and duties**
- 4 Workplace culture**

The strategies collected here are adapted from recent literature on peer employment by BC organizations and peer-led groups, most prominently the Peer2Peer project (i.e., Toward the Heart) funded by the BCCDC and BC Campus' Provider's Guide to Peer Support and Engagement. Please refer to the Resources section at the end of this document for more detail and information on how to access these sources.



WAGES, COMPENSATION & BENEFITS

Fair, equitable payment – Wages, salaries, honorarium, etc. for peers will vary from person to person and from job to job; however, how much and when payment is provided should be agreed to before work begins. This will ensure expectations are met and bureaucratic hurdles are overcome. Peers should be compensated for all of their work and not be expected to volunteer their time, which includes compensation for time spent on paperwork, emails and phone calls.

Address any potential complications for payment – Discuss options for payment (cash, cheque or direct deposit), financial institution barriers, income or disability assistance and employment earnings exemption (if applicable), and compensating expenses such as telephone and travel.

Peer payment exemptions – Within BC's Employment and Assistance (BCEA) policy manual, "payments to a person with a mental disorder who provides formal or informal peer support" are exempt from assistance deductions if their employer is a designated agency that "has been approved by a health authority to provide services on its behalf."¹ An employer can investigate whether or not their organization and peer staff qualify and apply for an exemption if they do. If successful, employers should inform all affected peer staff of the policy and provide them with a letter for exemption, which will help to ease any worry about losing their disability status or having their assistance cheques clawed back.

1 Government of British Columbia. (2005). *Ministry of Health/ Health Authority Therapeutic Volunteer Program and Other Volunteer Stipends*. Retrieved from: www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/policies-for-government/bcea-policy-and-procedure-manual/eligibility/income-treatment-and-exemptions

Adequately communicate the value and purpose of peer roles to unions – Many organizations that employ peers are unionised worksites, with the majority of their staff benefiting from collective agreements. Peer workers should be considered for union membership, but oftentimes the criteria used to value their roles does not align with the actual value they bring. Start to have those conversations with union representatives and work to have peer roles included, with access to the same employment protections and benefits as other staff.

Provide training and capacity bridging opportunities – Both peers and non-peer staff should be given the chance to develop their capacity, or the skills, abilities and knowledge they need to succeed within their roles. Any opportunity should take a strengths-based approach, whereby the strengths each peer and staff member bring to the group are identified, encouraged and developed. The expectation of building capacity should not rest solely on peer staff. Effective teams are built on shared learning and growth.

Provide proactive support that meets the needs of each individual peer worker – Peers and other professionals who engage in policy, practice and research can encounter emotionally charged topics that bring up experiences of stigma and discrimination. Employers should prepare to provide support when needed:

✓ **Mental/emotional supports** – To prevent unnecessary distress, employers should connect with peers regularly to see how they are doing, professionally and personally. Some support may be set up in advance e.g., health insurance coverage for counseling that is confidential and accessible or regular debriefing sessions to help resolve any issues that come up during a shift.

✓ **Substance use support** – In projects where there are many peers at the table, peers will be at different points in their drug use, ranging from full use to abstinent. Employers should strive to create a safe space for everyone regardless of their drug use. This may involve co-creating ground rules with peers for any group meetings or collaboration.

✓ **Wellness plan** – Employers and peers can work together to co-develop a plan to respond to triggers e.g., a Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) that helps each person identify when they are well and what they need to do to maintain wellness.

✓ **Financial planning support** – Financial strategies and other life skills training can be offered to help peers prepare for their new source of income. Some options include helping with bank accounts and budgeting, changing pay frequency, or connecting peers to a financial aid worker who can provide advice on payment options.



POLICIES & PROCESS

Review the literature – Peers have paved the way in developing engagement and recommendations that extend beyond scientific databases. Refer to the list of resources compiled at the end of this checklist and do your own research.

Prioritise hiring people with lived/living experience for a variety of roles – Peers bring more than their lived experience to a role. They all have unique skills, abilities and interests that can contribute to different parts of an organization.

Include a peer worker on hiring teams – Their lived/living experience can contribute to the development of job postings, application and assessment criteria, and recruitment strategies that are accessible to people with a range of skills and backgrounds, but not overly paternalistic. There needs to be a balance between maintaining a low-barrier recruitment process and not undervaluing the skills a peer could bring to the role.

Clearly articulate required qualifications for peer roles – Job postings and descriptions should include a clear outline of duties, necessary qualifications, and assets. They need to inform applicants and new hires of what skills are needed for the role and how they will be expected to use those skills. Employers should carefully consider whether or not a qualification is class-based or necessary e.g., peer support workers do not need a driver's license unless they are expected to drive clients, or a post-secondary degree when their lived experience is the required expertise.

Use an equity-oriented recruitment process that values diversity – Under-represented communities should be prioritized, and barriers to their involvement addressed, accordingly. Employers should clearly state on job postings that they welcome

applications from women, people of all sexual orientations and gender identities, persons with disabilities, members of visible minorities, and Indigenous People, and encourage applicants to disclose. The information about applicants' identities should inform hiring decisions and diverse lived experience should be considered an asset.

Create fact sheets and guidelines for all staff – Include current practices for hiring and supporting peer workers, and provide training and education on these topics (preferably led by peers) to management and other non-peer staff. Everyone within an organization should have the same understanding of what equitable employment entails and adhere to guidelines that guarantee consistency of practice.

Provide options for everything – Ask peers what works best for them, then individualize your process to accommodate those needs and wants. If disability-related, document supports within an accommodation plan that is regularly reviewed and updated to respond to changes in the peer worker's health and work environment.

Create safe feedback channels – Peer workers are often asked to participate and contribute to the systems that have or continue to harm them. At the beginning of the employment relationship, their supervisor or HR contact may not feel like a safe person to debrief with or disclose difficulties. Hiring a neutral, third party such as a Peer Mentor can provide peer workers with a safe channel for their concerns. The Peer Mentor can then relate these concerns to employers, creating a feedback loop that can address any issues that arise. They have the experiential knowledge to understand and communicate the experiences of the peer worker and exists outside the power dynamic of the employer/employee relationship.

Conduct regular surveys and reviews about peer worker satisfaction levels – Employers cannot address power imbalances, barriers or workplace issues that they don't know about or acknowledge. A safe, accessible method of polling could be an anonymous online survey or reviews conducted by a Peer Mentor.

Collect and review data about peer workers in your organization – Employers should track how many peers they employ, what roles they fill, and what their duties and responsibilities are. The data will help them identify their progress towards co-production and equitable partnership with peer workers.

Create an organisational structure that includes those with lived and living experience at the decision-making table – There are multiple ways organizations can achieve this e.g., prioritize hiring people with lived/living experience for leadership positions and/or support peers to move into those roles within the organization if interested.



JOB DESCRIPTION & DUTIES

Co-develop the project plan – To establish a collective vision and ensure all team members have an equal stake in its success, objectives and scope should be co-developed and clearly understood. Any questions or concerns should be addressed early on, especially with regards to engagement processes. Defining the project scope together develops rapport and trust, and provides an opportunity to address the needs of peers.

Define expectations – A project or program that starts with clear expectations will engender mutual understanding, prevent potential conflicts, increase transparency and foster trust between the employer and peers. These expectations should be set verbally and in writing, and include the scope of the project, how peers and non-peer staff will contribute to decisions, as well as clarity around communication, leadership, training, support, compensation and confidentiality issues.

Build work plans – A project or program's overarching short-term and long-term goals should be laid out in work plans, with details on activities performed by each team member. Work plans often address objectives, resources, tasks, timelines, deliverables, and responsibilities.

Maintain a clear idea of the project goals and progress – Staying on track can support peers and non-peer staff to reach and celebrate goals, which can be vital to the success of a project

Create opportunities for leadership – Allow and support peers to lead projects and take on co-chair roles. Trust their experience and abilities, but remain willing and able to provide tailored support when needed. Often, issues that arise relate to navigating systems and workplace culture, not performance.

Complete regular performance reviews – Peer workers should have regular opportunities to provide and receive feedback. Ideally, their supervisor will conduct reviews, but consider having a peer mentor step forward as a mediator if trust and safety have not been built between a peer and their supervisor.

Structure advancement opportunities for peer workers – There needs to be more opportunity and variety of roles for peer workers. While some peers are content providing support to other peers, many others want to build on their support experience to contribute to organizations and systems differently. Employers should provide clarity about long-term possibilities and support their development and goals.



WORKPLACE CULTURE

Process over outcomes – The outcomes of a project or program are null and void if the process is harmful, tokenizing or oppressive. Employers should prioritize the employment relationship, provide support, share power and strive toward meaningful co-production.

Peer networks – Employers should create opportunities for peers to connect with one another and work through challenges. Many peers have been oppressed by systems or had traumatizing experiences within institutions that have led to mistrust of formalized work environments. Peers are more inclined to see others who have similar life experiences as more reliable and knowledgeable. Prioritizing and building time for network building amongst peer staff promotes engagement, creates a sense of community and solidarity, and gives them the opportunity to discuss and act on issues that matter most to them.

Person-first language – Employers should be mindful of word choice and only use person-first language that avoids defining someone by a diagnosis or a challenge they are experiencing. Ask peers how they want to be identified and listen to them explain why certain word choices are harmful. Train all non-peer staff to use respectful language.

Adopt a set of values and principles – Many non-profits and advocacy groups have a mission statement and a set of values. Employers should ensure that these are not only compatible with co-production, but clearly state that lived/living experience is centered in their work and employment practices. In doing so, acknowledge that traumas have been generated by well-intended initiatives and hold every project and program accountable.

Reflect on your own processes – Reflection is uncomfortable, but necessary. Employers should examine the policies and procedures within their projects and programs, and identify areas in need of change.

Remember to do small things – Employers should not hesitate to give praise for a job well done or say thank you when peer workers go above and beyond. These small gestures do not replace broader organizational changes, but can add to peers' sense of inclusion and help them to feel valued.

Include peer workers in staff meetings, team meetings and informal social gatherings – Peers should not be excluded. If they are, the message is clear that their contributions are not valued equally to other staff.

Normalize a debriefing process – Every staff member comes to work with their own history and may encounter situations that are distressing. The opportunity to debrief after emotional or stressful activities will help maintain healthy boundaries and encourage openness and vulnerability among not only peers, but all staff. This is an important step towards shifting culture away from an emphasis on productivity and professionalism, and towards one that acknowledges our shared humanity.

Build ideas of allyship and continuous growth and learning into strategic plans – No organization is going to change overnight and culture is one of the most difficult things to shift, but clearly stating intentions and outlining steps to fulfilling them is essential e.g., commit to ethical allyship and as a first step offer an anti-oppression course to all staff.

FINAL REMINDERS ON ATTITUDES & ACTIONS THAT SUPPORT PEER EMPOWERMENT:

- Respect the expertise of lived and living experience.
- Listen to peer workers' opinions and take their ideas seriously.
- Provide support to peer workers to enable them to do the work that is needed.
- Treat peer workers as professionals who do meaningful work.
- Treat peer workers as an integral part of the team.
- Allow peers to share what they are comfortable sharing.
- Recognize that people "show up" in different ways.
- Listen to each peer worker's authentic story. Everyone is different.
- Recognize that not everyone will be willing to share their traumas.
- Recognize that peer workers can move in and out of lived and living experience, and that this process adds to their expertise.
- Acknowledge and uplift peer workers' strengths.
- Encourage staff to advocate for peer workers when they aren't being treated fairly.
- Regularly ask peer workers if they feel heard and included.
- Recognize the power and privilege that comes from being the employer, and how it can be used to re-enfranchise people.

RESOURCES

Newell, A. (2020). Employers Guide to Peer Worker Support and Engagement. BC Campus.

This course looks at ways employers can support and engage peer support workers in the mental health and addictions care systems. Topics covered include the role of peer support workers, benefits of using peer support workers, peer support worker engagement, increasing empowerment of peer support workers and overcoming barriers. The content was co-developed with a number of peer-led working groups that possess a range of lived/ living expertise such as mental health, substance use, harm reduction and public health. An online version of the course will be open-source and available to employers early 2021.

Website URL: peerconnectbc.ca/courses/test-course-3

Greer, A.M., Amlani, A.A., Buxton, J.A. & the PEEP team. (2017). Peer Engagement Best Practices: A Guide for Health Authorities and other providers. BC Centre for Disease Control.

The BC Harm Reduction Strategies and Services Committee (BCHRSS) initiated the Peer Engagement and Evaluation Project (PEEP) to improve understanding of peer engagement principles and practices among BC Health Authorities. The project engaged peer research assistants and several Health Authority representatives from across the province and utilized participatory action methods to conduct 13 focus groups with 83 participants from all five regions. This final report documents the development, implementation and evaluation of their best practice guidelines that define peer engagement and propose meaningful practices, with consideration of power dynamics, benefits to peers and providers, regional differences, stigma and trust, and organizational support.

Website URL: www.bccdc.ca/resource-gallery/Documents/PEEP%20Best%20Practice%20Guidelines.pdf

Becu, A. & Allan, L. (2017). Peer Payment Standards for Short-Term Engagement. BC Centre for Disease Control

BCCDC Peer Payment Standards was created as a supplement to BCCDC Peer Engagement Principles and Best Practices. The guide recommends payment amounts and methods to use when engaging peers across British Columbia, with an emphasis on consistent and thoughtful compensation. The focus is short-term peer engagements such as attending meetings as an expert or advising on policy documents, which are not considered employment. These standards are intended for BCCDC, Health Authorities and other organizations that engage peers, with recognition that some groups may be subject to funding constraints.

Website URL: www.bccdc.ca/resource-gallery/Documents/Educational%20Materials/Epid/Other/peer_payment-guide_2018.pdf

Greer, A., Buxton, J., Bungay, V., & Pauly, B. (2020). Peer Work: Findings and recommendations from a study on peer work in BC.

The PEEP team initiated another community-based research study on peer work in British Columbia, where they interviewed 15 people who use drugs on their work experiences in harm reduction. The key findings documented in this initial report are that peer workers enjoy their work, find work arrangements unstable and uncertain, feel stressed and unsupported, and experience power inequities. Their recommendations to address these issues are to increase transparency on job requirements and compensation, promote equity

by upholding rights and providing benefits, and advocate for better working conditions.

Website URL: towardtheheart.com/assets/uploads/1596131175V92INsqnGo8brgfGnM2Pq9VeQpy9Hr203ivMqNW.pdf

Toward the Heart. (2020). Respectful Language and Stigma regarding People who use Substances. BC Centre for Disease Control.

This briefing note defines stigma, outlines how stigma influences health, and recommends using non-stigmatizing language that is person-first, reflects the medical nature of substance use disorders, promotes recovery and avoids slangs and idioms. The intended audience is healthcare staff and those who address the media, but the guidelines apply to all stakeholders, who can contribute to changing discriminatory biases around drug use

Website URL: towardtheheart.com/assets/uploads/1502392191GWLgqDb5w5GlajwRuiq4IPoSyhSoMkp3T7rL5ml.pdf

The Peer2Peer Research Team. (2020). Best Practice Manual for Supporting Peers/Experiential Workers in Overdose Response Settings. Vancouver, BC.

The Peer2Peer (P2P) project aimed to develop, implement, and evaluate models and strategies to support peers/experiential workers working in BC overdose response settings. Their research team conducted 8 peer-led focus groups across the Lower Mainland and Vancouver Island to identify areas of support and practical interventions. The latter are collectively titled ROSE, based on four themes; R-Recognition, O-Organizational Support, S-Skill

Development and E-Everyone. This Best Practice Manual includes documents and strategies that were developed by and with peers/experiential workers as part of the ROSE model. The strategies included are intended for everyone to use and can be implemented by any organization that engages with peers/experiential workers.

Website URL: towardtheheart.com/peer-engagement

Baker, D., Belle-Isle, L., Crichlow, F., de Kiewit, A., Lacroix, K., Murphy, D., Pelletier, R., & Silver, B.R. (2015). Peerology: A guide by and for people who use drugs on how to get involved. Canadian Aids Society.

Peerology, written by and for people who use drugs, provides guidance to those who wish to get involved locally and mobilize to improve the life conditions of people who use drugs in their area. This guides offers advice on how to include people who use drugs in decisions that affect their lives, tips on building capacity to respond to the needs of people who use drugs, examples of leadership training, information on how to get involved in meetings and events, and procedures for setting up programs by and for people who use drugs. There is also a directory of existing organizations of people who use drugs and other useful resources.

Website URL: www.catie.ca/en/resources/peerology-guide-and-people-who-use-drugs-how-get-involved

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