

# PEER WORK

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM A STUDY ON PEER WORK IN B.C.



A 'Peer' worker is a person who has lived experience of substance use (current or past) who uses that expertise to inform their professional work.

## WHAT WE DID

From B.C.'s Peer Engagement and Evaluation Project in 2016-2018, we learned that peer work was an issue that mattered to people who use drugs.

In 2017 - 2018, we had in-depth conversations with 15 people who use drugs in B.C. about their work experiences in harm reduction. Audio tapes of the conversations were typed up and then analyzed. The main findings and our recommendations from this project are presented here.

## WHAT WE FOUND

### Peer workers enjoy the work they do.

"Seeing people that I cared about every day was great. And going, getting up and me being all jazzed up every morning to go and fight the good fight..."

"There's a lot of gratitude... people are always very grateful and happy..."

"I love working with other people who use drugs. I love when we sort of make progress on something or I know that, like, I helped people out, helped them get paid..."

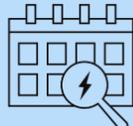
### Peer work arrangements are unstable and uncertain.



#### Informal work arrangements

Casual work as 'under-the-table' or volunteer-for-stipend was the norm

**Peer workers want access to a range of work arrangements – including flexible, low-barrier jobs and formal, long-term positions**



#### Uncertain work future

Random and sporadic work is unpredictable  
People fear losing work

**More secure, predictable and consistent work is needed**



#### Low, cash-based wages

Workers accepted informal work and cash wages out of fear of losing social assistance. Workers had to choose to accept low wages or go without work.

**More peer job opportunities are needed**



#### Access to workers' rights

Casual work took away rights  
Many were unsure or unclear of rights

**Peer workers are interested in organizing as a union or collective to advocate for workers' rights**

### Peer work is stressful and unsupported.



Work demands included witnessing overdoses, pressure to succeed, learning workplace rules, and working within harmful systems.



The greatest source of support for peer workers was their community, but there is concern about the burden they carry.



Workers emphasized the need for debriefing and peer-based emotional and role supports.

### Power inequities in peer work.

Peer workers felt controlled by non-peer "gatekeepers" who restricted access to resources and job opportunities  
Some peer workers feel "used" by employers

Workers wanted meaningful opportunities to share their voice and influence change.

Employers need to make a commitment to peer work, formally hiring, supporting and integrating workers into agencies.

"I don't want to go through you. I don't want to have to be gatekept... I want to develop my own networks.... facing relationship...I don't want to have to serve your agenda in order to get into these rooms."

#### Quotes from workers

"There's a complete lack of accountability in any sense. And they can all be arbitrarily fired at the drop of the hat and then rehired... it's all part of this 'we can make you what you are or we can take it all away'

"[non-peers] make 23 bucks an hour, you're doing the same work and you're making 10 or 15 if you're lucky."

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# Thoughtfully Organizing Peer work



Recommendations from a study on peer work in B.C.

## Be transparent

and have a conversation about:



- Pay options (i.e. cash, cheque, VISA gift card etc.)
- Work schedules and consistency
- Job timelines and potential future work
- Role and work objectives
- Training
- Lived or living experience informing the work
- Benefits (i.e. sick pay, vacation days)
- Limitations of team members and the project

## Promote equity

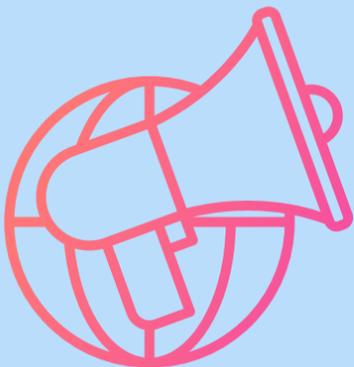
by ensuring access to:

- Workers' rights and benefits
- A variety of pay options and choice
- Emotional supports (i.e. debriefing) – make peer-based where possible
- Role supports (i.e. training, tools, supplies)
- Communication pathways with management, administration and decision-makers
- Relationship-building opportunities between workers and other networks
- Peer mentoring
- Best practices, pay standards and workers rights information



## Advocate for

and try to make better:



- Jobs, including full-time positions that are integrated into the agency
- Pay that is bench marked against others in same or similar positions (at least)
- Job advancement and diverse career pathways

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Also check out related and ongoing PEEP Consultation and Advisory Group and Peer2Peer project:  
<https://towardtheheart.com/peer-engagement>