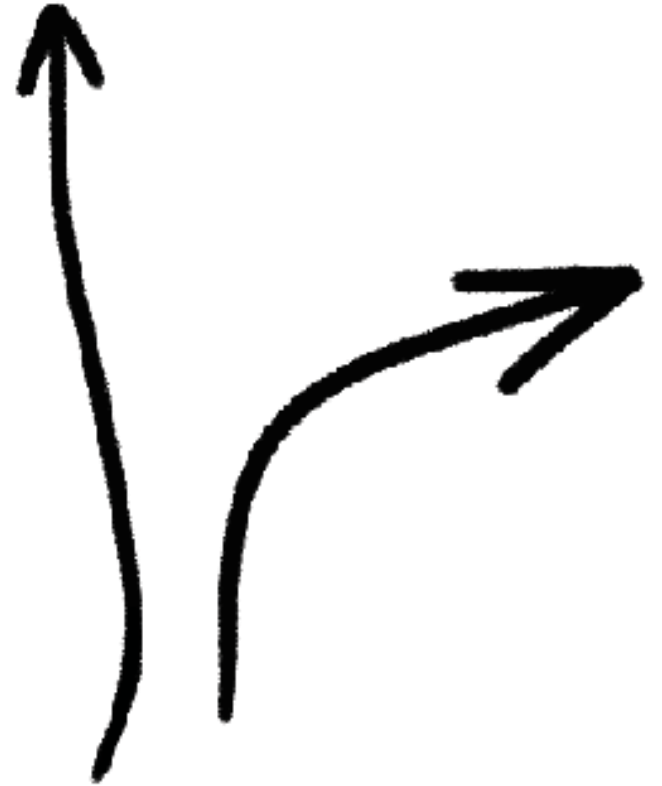# Escaping the maze

Findings, recommendations, and strategies
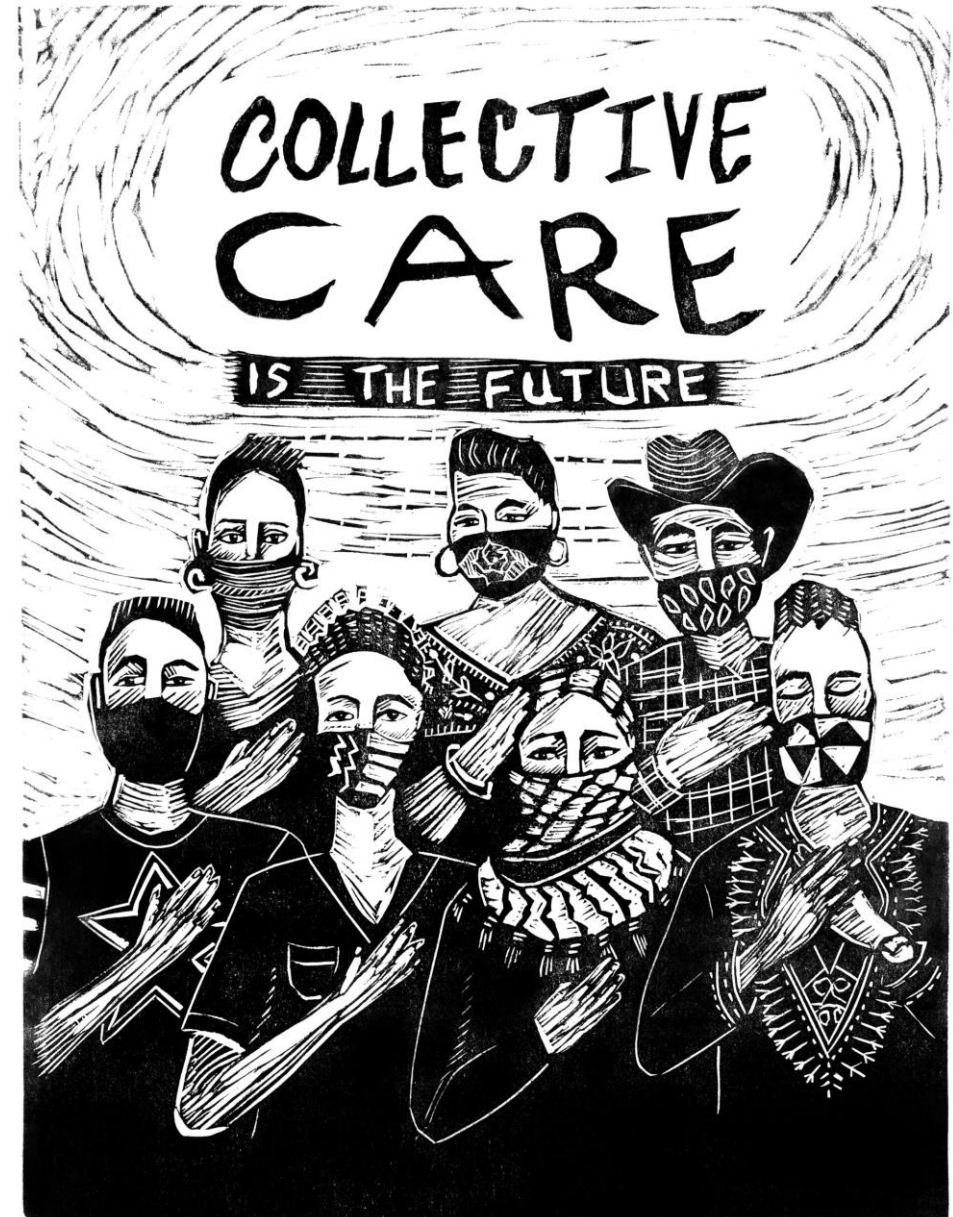from the Supporting Peer Work (SPW) project

Agenda

- Access, space-making and treaty
- Supporting Peer Work (SPW)
- Research findings
- Demands
- Questions for agencies
- Q & A
- Conversation prompts
- Next steps and closing

Access needs

- Can everyone see and hear, if relevant? Is the ASL interpreter visible?

- Are captions turned on?

- Can people access the chat?

- Any other **access needs**?

Accountable space

- What do we need to feel capable of listening to and discussing workplace exploitation, oppression and survival?

- What [agreements](#) can we come to as a temporary community to make safer space?
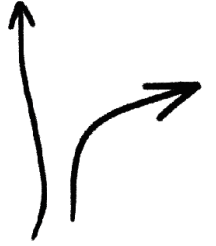
Treaty responsibilities

SPW does our work on the unceded, traditional and current territories of the nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Wendat, and the Mississaugas of the Credit River. This land is home to many Indigenous peoples from across the globe, including those who have been severed from their original territories by the violence of the trans-Atlantic enslavement system, white supremacy, imperialism and colonialism globally.

As a research team, we are accountable to The Dish with One Spoon and the Two Row Wampum, pre-Confederation treaties which are the true laws of this land, as well as Treaty 13 with the colonial government. The state, social service agencies and individuals break and violate these treaties consistently. SPW tries to pay attention to our treaty responsibilities in everything we do as individuals, and as community.

Consider…

- Whose land are you on? How did you come to be on that land? What is your relationship to it?

- What are your responsibilities to the Indigenous nations and treaties that govern that land?

- How can you be sure you are living up to these responsibilities and/or working against colonialism – here and elsewhere – in **all** that you do?

Supporting Peer Work

Supporting Peer Work (SPW)

SPW is an advocacy initiative that comes out of a community-driven research project. Between 2020 and 2023, SPW studied the working conditions of **peers** in **low barrier social service agencies** during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This work was funded by the Federal government, and involved George Brown College (GBC), Working for Change (WfC) and the Toronto Drop-In Network (TDIN). It was steered and shaped by a committee of experts in community work from lived/living expertise. Our core team includes:

- Andre Hermanstyne
- Lindsay Jennings
- Madelyn Gold
- Maria Scotton
- Suwaida Farah

- Michael Nurse
- Griffin Epstein
- Dawnmarie Harriott
- Julia Walter

Key terms

- **Peer work:** Any social service position reserved for people who share lived/living experiences with the communities they serve, including those that go by other names. We know "peer" loaded and support all efforts to develop more accurate and empowering language. At the same time, we found that people with different job titles still faced discrimination based on their status as current or former service users.

- **Community-guided research:** A strategy for reducing the harms of academic work by making sure that people whose experiences are being researched have control over how their data is collected, analyzed, and used. Ideally, community-guided research turns into action for change.

- **"Low-barrier" social service agency:** A non-profit like a drop-in or Community Health Centre that provides survival resources to **structurally oppressed** people and communities. These organizations are often the most accessible spaces within the social service system, but are still shaped by **colonialism, capitalism, white supremacy, cisheteropatriarchy,** and **ableism.** For more on how we use these terms and concepts, please see our full report on [our website.](#)

We came together with a shared lens

- Peer work is a transformative and necessary practice that is different from other types of social supports.

- Peers face exploitation and oppression at non-profit agencies.

- The problems peers experience at work are not because they lack "training."
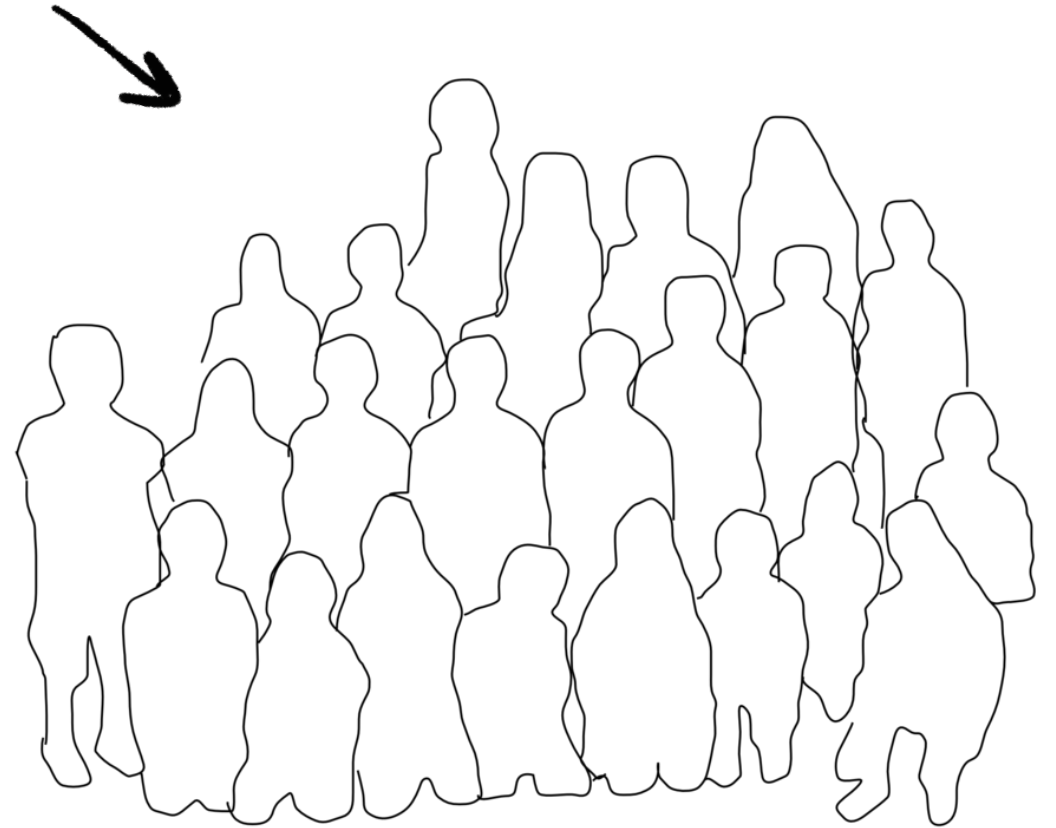
To do our research, we…

- Invested in our relationships as a core team.

- Paid attention to our treaty responsibilities.

- Made decisions by consensus.

- Collaboratively wrote outreach and interview scripts.

- Prioritized the needs, desires, and insights of peer workers.

- Compensated all interviewees equitably.
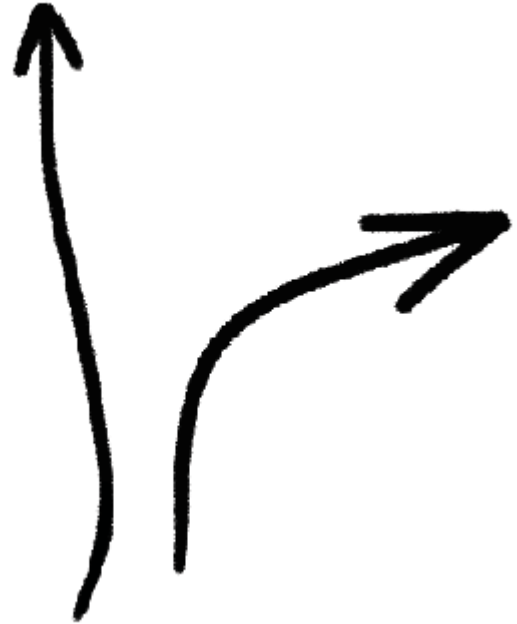
Interview demographics

Peer interviewees (35 people)

- Our peer interviewees were relatively racially diverse (29% white, 26% Indigenous, 11% Black, 14% racialized but not Black or Indigenous).

- A little over half (57%) were cisgender women; the rest were cisgender men (23%) and trans, non-binary and/or gender-diverse people (8%).

- 80% were working as peers at the time of interview.

- We did not ask about specific lived experiences, but most identified as current or former criminalized drug users; many were or had been unhoused; several identified as disabled; some had experience as sex workers; many had survived incarceration.

Supervisor interviewees (16 people)

- The supervisors we interviewed were majority white (81%), and many more were cisgender men than the social work norm (44%).

- 87% were working in supervisory and/or managerial positions over peers at the time.

- Some identified their own lived and/or living experience but did not share specifics.

- Many identified as leaders in the field, but generally were much more concerned than the peer interviewees about being identifiable in the final report.

*Disaggregated and decontextualized

Findings

1) Peers and supervisors define "peer work" differently

- Despite saying they support the unique contributions of peers, **supervisors** think of peer work as a "learning opportunity" or "stepping-stone" to "mainstream employment."

- **Peers** see their work very differently. Peers challenge oppressive practices and lead new initiatives. They resist the "gatekeeping" of social services by "cultivating community." For some Indigenous workers, peer work is how they "decolonize care."

"A peer is somebody that is a peer of *the community*, not a peer of *your organization*. This is where organizations get confused. Yeah, [peers are] doing the work…but they're doing it in a way they know the community needs."

Peer Worker

2) Peers work precarious positions, which supervisors claim is unavoidable

- The pandemic has increased the risk and intensity of peer work, but not the pay. Almost all **peers** we spoke to worked underpaid and insecure contract jobs with no benefits.

- Most **supervisors** acknowledged this inequity but said their "hands are tied" by funders. Others justified low pay as necessary so peers could receive social assistance, even though many workers are not on OW or ODSP. Some supervisors said low pay was just an unavoidable reality of poverty and "better than nothing."

"It's a more desperate workforce that's willing to do jobs that many people are not willing to do at a lower rate."

Supervisor

3) Peers face discrimination, which supervisors justify as "support"

- Many **peers** experience disrespect and scrutiny from non-peers, with Black peers facing the highest levels of surveillance and distrust. Most peers are asked intrusive questions about "self-care," while being denied the resources to meet their actual needs.

- Many **supervisors** justify their scrutiny of peers as necessary, suggesting that peers need "case management" and other types of social work support rather than better pay and working conditions.

"I am a harm reduction worker. We were literally hired to give knowledge about substance use. Not serve food, not clean toilets. It seems these jobs that nobody else is willing to do fall on peers."

Peer Worker

4) The physical spaces of "low barrier" agencies are unwelcoming or hostile to peers

- **Peers** are often forced to work in basements or on lower floors. They get locked out of front doors and offices. Black and Indigenous workers reported the greatest barriers to accessing agency space and the most scrutiny in them.

- **Peers** are also subjected to more grief, loss, violence at work, and greater exposure to COVID-19 than any other workers. Outreach and offsite workers, especially those at satellite sites, face the most danger with the least support.

"If I need that money, which I do, I just put up with the risk of getting sick."

Peer Worker

"Why am I getting treated like I'm a criminal in my own workspace?"

Peer Worker

5) Supervisors hold peers to oppressive standards

- **Supervisors** hire peers for their community knowledge, then claim they lack the "professionalism" to succeed. For many supervisors, "professionalism" means *appearing* to not use drugs, being punctual, and not struggling with paperwork.

- Research shows that these types of "professional" standards judge a person's access to economic and social stability rather than the quality of their work. They are known to be racist, classist, ableist, and colonial.

"[The organization is] predominantly very cis, white, straight and those are the people that [are] getting promoted"

Peer Worker

"The truth is, if I got paid what I'm worth, I don't think I would have a problem attending."

Peer Worker

6) Peers sometimes oppress each other to get ahead

- Under inequitable working conditions, **peers** often compete with and police each other to get better work. Workers with more social power sometimes described themselves as "not like other peers" and/or made negative or insulting comments about their colleagues with more oppressed identities. Black and Indigenous peer workers shared the most stories of oppression from their colleagues.

- **Supervisors** said that these dynamics between peers made them "uncomfortable," but admitted they sometimes "played into the hiring process."

"The peers stick together as much as they can…but because there is not the pay equity and because there are not a lot of full-time permanent peer jobs, people are stepping on each other to get ahead."

Peer Worker

In summary…

While many organizations *say* they value the contributions of people with lived/living expertise, they force peer workers to follow policies and practices that undermine their unique knowledge and skills. Peers face discrimination, neglect, and double standards that block them from making positive change at their organizations and in their lives.

To truly support peer work, organizations must break down the barriers *they have built* to meaningful and equitable employment. This starts with providing *all* workers job security and a living wage, but it doesn't end there. Many peers with permanent jobs still experience oppression in workplace culture and physical spaces. Peers have the potential to forge new paths, but only if they are trusted, respected, and resourced on their own terms.
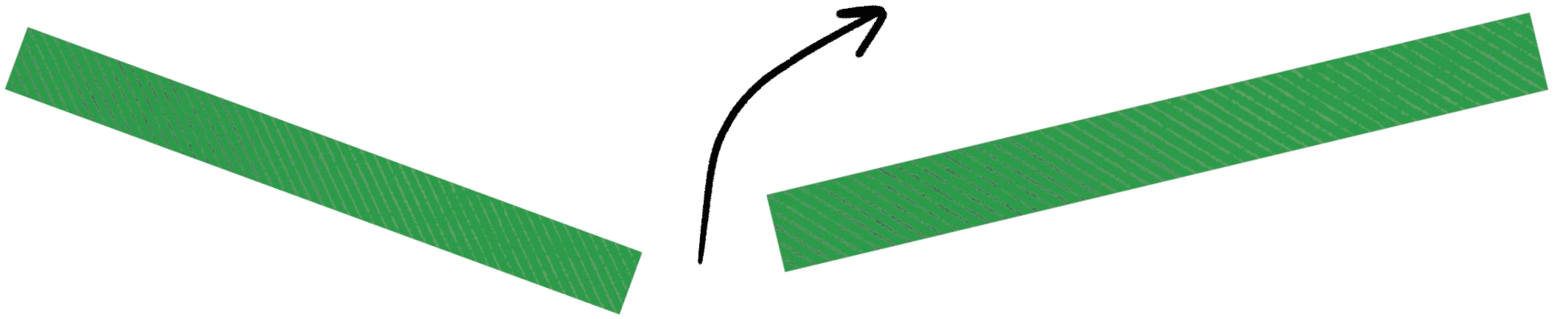
How do we escape these traps and dead ends?
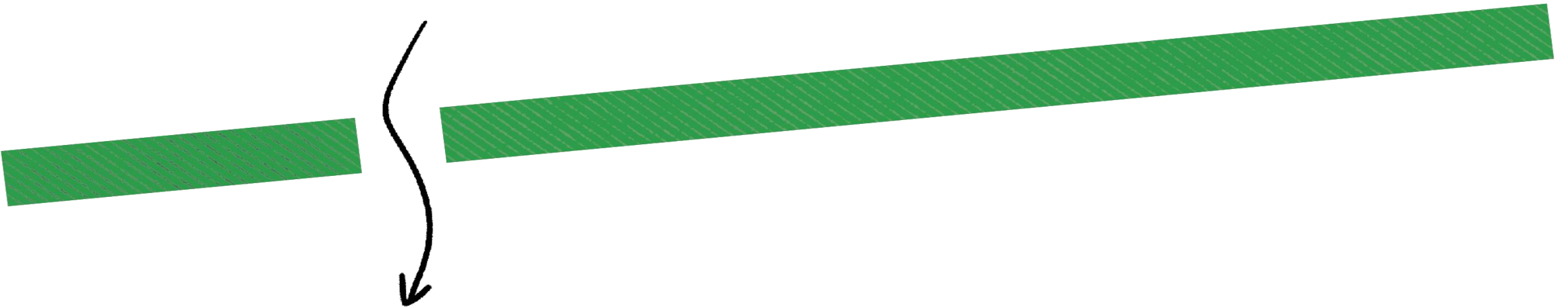
Demands:

- **Commit to honoring community knowledge:** Agencies must take direction from the people whose needs they claim to meet. People with lived/living expertise should be at every organizational level.

- **Change hiring and onboarding:** Peer work should not require credentials. People should be hired for their "real abilities" and trained in "things that matter" like "labor rights," and "paperwork."

- **Provide meaningful employment:** Peer roles must be better paid and more secure; peers also need collective representation, ideally through a "separate union."

Demands:

- **Ensure physical access and safety:** Peers need access to all agency spaces in safe and meaningful ways and need resources to reduce violence and deal with grief in the workplace.

- **Confront oppression:** Agencies must address how colonialism, white supremacy, anti-Black racism, and all forms of oppression shape their work. This starts by hiring, supporting, and respecting Black and Indigenous peer workers, but does not end there.

- **Change the culture:** Supervisors should "know and understand what value peers bring." They must change their practices and give up some of their power.

Questions for agencies

Consider…

- What is the role of the communities you serve in making decisions about the direction of your organization?

- How does your agency define "peer work"?

- How much are peer workers paid?

- Who decides what peer workers do and do not do?

- What do non-peer staff think about peers?

- How can you address discrimination against peer workers by non-peer staff, supervisors and managers?

…find more on our website.

What questions do you have for us?

After hearing our findings and demands, we'd like to know....

Reflection questions

- Are people with lived/living experience guiding the work you do at every level (e.g., policy, governance, direction, compensation, etc.)? If so, how? If not, why not?

- What barriers does your organization put in the way of people with lived/living expertise that prevent them from doing their essential work?

- What changes can you make in your organization so people with lived/living expertise have meaningful employment?

What's next for SPW?

We are working to get our findings, demands, and questions into the hands of peer workers, supervisors, Executive Directors, Board members and funders. Our current priorities are:
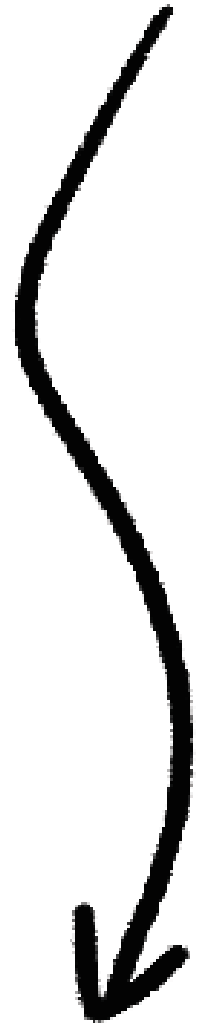
- Building trainings for agency leaders and funders on how to support peers.

- Supporting agencies in changing workplace culture.

- Challenging prisons and jails to allow survivors of these systems to work inside them.

- Planting the seeds for a peer worker union, separate from any specific workplace.

We are available to consult with you and your agency, if equitably compensated. We are also looking for funding opportunities to continue our work. Please reach out to us at spwteam2020@gmail.com to discuss!

Check out

- What was your main takeaway from this session?

- What do you have even *more* questions about now?

- What do you want to start working on straight away?

- What are you feeling nervous about? Confused about?

- What are you excited for?

Closing