

UPHNS HUB CoP (Community of Practice) Call

March 1, 2024

Escaping the Maze: Findings, Recommendations and Strategies from the Supporting Peer Work (SPW) Project

Welcome, translation information, Land acknowledgement, Anti-oppression statement, recording, Black ancestral acknowledgement (Taylor) - Clem

Presenter Intros: Griffin, Maddy, Suwaida, Maria, Michael, Andre

Attendees: 32

Presentation

Access, Space-making, and treaty: Guidelines (Ask questions, assuming good intent, be non-judgmental, hold space for caring, understanding it is okay to feel uncomfortable, recognize everyone has their own expertise, remember the difference between unsafe and uncomfortable,

Supporting Peer Work (SPW) - Advocacy initiative that came out of a research project, studied the working conditions of peers in low barrier social services

Peer Work: those with lived & living experience, problematize this word, leads to discrimination in the workplace

Low-Barrier: survival resources for those who are structurally oppressed

Research Findings: Not aiming for objective research, took as a given that peer work is a necessary practice that is different from other types of social supports, Peers face exploitation and oppression in the work, the problems exist not from a lack of training

<https://supportingpeerwork.ca/>

Equitable compensation was one of the most difficult pieces of this research

35 Peer interviews, 16 Supervisor interviews, prioritized anonymity could not risk outing folks

Most shared they were current or former drug users, but was not a question

The supervisors were more white, cis, and concerned about being identified in the final report

Findings:

1. Peers and Supervisors define 'peer work' differently; supervisors see peer work as a 'steppingstone' to 'mainstream employment,' peers see their work through the lens of community, anti-oppression, and resistance to 'gatekeeping'

Should be up to the peer to decide how and when they identify with that term, not the organization, the term peer work is evolving still, peer and community are intertwined, agencies tend to tokenize and separate this work, community and peer work go hand in hand, peer work brings connection to an agency, Peers also bring the skills from the community to the agency, peers bring credibility to the agency, peers put their own credibility at risk to bring this to the agency, peer work as it is currently practiced is a distortion of community work, the work must be liberated!

2. Peers work precarious positions and supervisors claim that is unavoidable

Peers work contracts that are underpaid, insecure and usually lacks benefits, Supervisors acknowledge this but claim the hands are tied by the funders, some supervisors claim the low pay is unavoidable reality of poverty and 'better than nothing'

3. Peers face discrimination which supervisors justify as 'Support'

Scrutiny is prevalent, surveillance and distrust is rampant, 'self-care' conversations brought up even when not appropriate

4. Physical spaces of 'low barrier' agencies are unwelcoming or hostile

Peers are often forced to work out of basements or lower floors, they get locked out of front doors, peers are subject to higher risk work (more violence, higher chance of getting sick, "why am I getting treated like a criminal in my own workspace")

5. Supervisors hold peers to oppressive standards

Peers get hired for their community knowledge but then held to 'professional standards' that are not in line with the work, racism, classism, ablism and colonialism are the norm, expectation to be credentialized, peers get held back from promotions

6. Peers sometimes oppress each other to get ahead

Peers must compete and police each other to get better work, workers with more social power will describe themselves as not like other peers, lack of pay equity leads to stepping on each other to get ahead

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 does not 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.

Demands:

Commit to honoring community knowledge: agencies need to take direction from those with lived/living experience, this work must be acknowledged as essential to the agency

Change Hiring and Onboarding:

Provide Meaningful Employment:

Ensure Physical Access & Safety:

Confront Oppression: hiring, supporting, and promoting Black and Indigenous workers

Change the Culture: agencies must give up some of their power

Questions for Agencies:

- 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?

Q&A Time:

Stigma must be addressed, these are communities of disempowered people, what can orgs do to reduce stigma?

Peer work is not the realm of the agency, it is the realm of the community

<https://supportingpeerwork.ca/report>

Drop-ins moved to basements, side doors, lower levels, top floors reserved for management

Messaging and poster on the walls can signal that this is a space for you

Stigma needs to be addressed right in the funding

Resources must stay to benefit the community

Persona that you do not use anymore is encouraged, try to resist this, and stay true to who you are

Keep criticism about job performance only!

Closing thoughts & Final words:

Stay true to yourself and your community; learning to manage boundaries and confidentiality

Battle Stigma: continue to challenge orgs and yourself, day to day basis

Do what is best for the person that you are working with, trust your instincts, listen to their needs, it is okay to say that you do not know what they are going through but that you care anyways

EQUITABLE COMPENSATION!!! Check in with your values, everything needs to be returned to the hands of communities, what are you doing to dismantle systems of oppression?

Closing Moment of Silence – Matt Bonn

Presenter Bios:

Bio for Maria Scotton:

Maria Scotton is a Harm Reduction Trainer in Toronto with over ten years professional practice working in the Social Service sector. She has lived/living experience of mental health, homelessness and substance use. She is involved in various advocacy working groups and committees such as the Toronto Drop-In Network (TDIN) Advocacy Committee, National Safer Supply Community of Practice (NSS-CoP), Supporting Peer Work (SPW) Steering Committee, Clinical Guidance Working Group, Canadian Association of People who Use Drugs (CAPUD) and many more. Her passion is frontline work and specializes in developing training programs for staff working in healthcare and social service settings around Harm Reduction, Peer Work and best practices in Social Service work.

Michael Nurse

Michael Nurse (he/him/they/them) is an elder of African descent; a father of two adult sons and an adult daughter; a granddad to a very young and *intriguing* granddaughter; an uncle and granduncle; a friend; a colleague.

He is a settler, living in Toronto, on the unseeded territory of several Indigenous nations, including the Mississauga's of the Credit, the Anishinaabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples

Pronounced and profound personal experiences of emotional trauma; using drugs, deemed as illicit; the criminal injustice system and decades of collaborating in community-development work, as a community-based expert/contributor, are mainstays in his perspective on and his approach to “peer work” and community development.

Madelyn Gold

Madelyn Gold (she/her) is a lived experience advisor with over nine years' experience working front lines in Toronto community drop-ins. Respectfully supporting marginalized individuals from diverse, racialized and cultural backgrounds

She is a devoted advocate and community expert in harm reduction and has both participated and actively led movements and resources for BIPOC, 2SLGBTQ+ communities. For decades, she has led mutual aid initiatives in her community and now serves to share her expertise to enhance resources for all people with lived experience.

Madelyn has been a member in over thirty advisory panels and special projects and has been published in the following documents - This is Not Home Project, The Our Care Priorities Panel, The Shelter Pipeline Project, Supporting Peer Work Escaping The Maze Steering Committee and The National Safer Supply Community of Practice.

Her activism successes include advising for The Reach Out Response Network to implement non-police response for mental health crisis services in the City of Toronto.

She has been a proud member of the Fair Fare Pass Coalition, which debuted at City Hall to lower TTC fares for people on assistance. It was a success and as a result folks pay a lower transit fair.

Madelyn volunteers for the Freecycle website as an online moderator, assists seniors in her community with necessary resources and is part of Revenue Canada's community volunteer income tax clinic. An ambassador for Fill a Purse for a Sister campaign and the Bad Date Book Coalition.

griffin

griffin epstein (they/them) is a Mad/psychiatrized white settler educator, community-driven researcher, and writer living in Tkaronto/Toronto (Dish with One Spoon territory). They have both

given and received "mental health" services, and now teach future social service workers about harm reduction and the violence of the social work system at George Brown College. They are a member of several disability justice grassroots organizing initiatives and artists collective and aspire to be in solidarity with all peoples self-organizing for liberation.

Suwaida

My name is Suwaida, thank you for taking the time to read my bio. I was born and raised in Toronto, Ontario to immigrant Somali parents, who came to Toronto in the early 90's to establish a better life for their families. I take pride in my roots as a Muslim Somali woman, but acknowledge the gap in representation and the taboo that still exists within my own culture, specifically around topics such as addiction and mental health. Having spent most of my young adult years living in various shelter spaces in Toronto, I have my own lived experience with the psychiatric system and identify as a person who use(d) substances. I currently work in the field of mental health and addiction, and plan on pursuing a degree in counselling. My goal is to support underrepresented populations who have no choice but to suffer in silence and stand in solidarity with those whose voices go unnoticed.

Marc-Andre Hermanstyne (he/him) has been working in the social work field for over a decade, starting out with the Black Coalition for AIDS where he learned about the importance of being an ally to vulnerable communities. Over his career he has worked for a number of diverse communities, including Ve'ahavta Jewish Response to Homelessness and South Riverdale, where he created an outreach strategy running along the Danforth into the neighbourhoods of Taylor Massey and Oakridge. Marc-Andre is a staunch advocate for the rights and freedoms of youth, and people who use drugs and/or struggle with mental health concerns.

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