

Peer Support

White Paper



APPROVED BY



Canadian Mental
Health Association
Calgary
Mental health for all

PREPARED BY

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Summary

Wellness Model

CMHA Calgary's mission is to reduce the impact of mental illness and addictions on our community, individuals and families. It is built on the 'wellness model'¹ that shifts the emphasis from a narrow focus on diagnosis to one of personal strength and resilience. It empowers individuals to live beyond the stigma of their mental illness and/or addiction. The mechanism through which CMHA develops strength and resilience is peer support.

"I like to be with people and hear their experiences. Sometimes I need the support and other times I can offer support. When I feel overwhelmed... it is a good place to come and feel heard, validated, and supported."

CMHA Peer Support Recipient

Barriers to making social connections, generating hope or belonging

CMHA believes that recovery is possible for all its clients. People living with mental health challenges and/or addiction often experience barriers to accessing services. They experience isolation or remain disconnected from systems of care. Further, they may face stigma and discrimination on the basis of many intersecting identities, such as being poor, unemployed, homeless, challenges in mental and physical health. This can further compound their capacity to engage in community and participate in all aspects of social life. While social workers, doctors, and public health specialists fulfil a specific role around treatment and rehabilitation, there is a gap in helping people make social connections and generate hope or belonging. Peer workers act as connectors and supporters, helping individuals, families and communities connect with others and improve their health.

Peer Model

Peers are an integral part of the fabric of services delivered at CMHA Calgary. CMHA Calgary's School of Peer Support not only trains peer support workers but also employs peers in a Welcome Centre and a Recovery College. Peers help to co-develop and co-facilitate courses, manage programs, and support administration. CMHA peers also work with the broader health system such as Alberta Health Services, non-profits and community organizations to shift the overall approach to people living with mental health and addictions.

Evaluation and Evidence

Rigorous evaluation of CMHA Calgary's Welcome Centre and Recovery College by Habitus Consulting Collective supports the following claims:

- CMHA peer training helps peers to more effectively enact a peer role—in terms of modeling recovery, share lived experience and support others by offering hope and friendship.
- Peer support meets an essential gap in the mental health system and community by providing support and hope; it does not replace traditional mental health treatment but rather compliments it and enhances outcomes.
- Peer support principles, though often applied as individual strategies, can be exported to broad community-based or mental health systems, as well as be embedded in traditional workplaces.

Ultimately, this paper sets the foundation of the development of a skilled peer workforce, starting with the CMHA Calgary School of Peer Support, and tested through peer practice in the Welcome Centre and Recovery College. While the examples in this paper are specific to these programs, the conclusions drawn reflect the CMHA Calgary overall approach to peer support. These lessons can be applied to other programming sites and other programs or extended as learnings to new partnerships.

Background

CMHA Calgary is a community based mental health organization celebrating 60 years of service. It is part of a network of Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) branches located in over 120 communities nationally. In 2017, CMHA Calgary provided community support and HOPE (Housing, Outreach, Peer Support, and Education) to over 32,000 individuals impacted by mental illness and addiction living in Calgary and surrounding areas.

Peer support is an evidence-informed practice with the potential to shift how public services are delivered. Research shows that peer support is a unique support to public health as it helps prevent illness, manage chronic conditions, cope with emotional or psychological challenges. It also helps communities reduce the burden of health care, address stigma and discrimination, encourage collaborative work, and reduce costs. Over the past two decades CMHA Calgary has developed its own unique model of peer support, integrating core principles and competencies to shape peer work.



Defining Peer Role

While the term peer evokes many meanings in daily life, the term holds a specific connotation in the context of recovery and mental health.

- Peers are people who have faced, endured, and overcome adversity and can offer “useful support, encouragement, hope, and perhaps mentorship to others facing similar situations”¹.
- Peer support workers, also termed “consumer–providers” or “peer specialists”. They serve as role models to their peers and showcase hope and recovery².
- They offer mutual “social emotional support, frequently coupled with instrumental support” to others in order to bring about desired social or personal change³. This is called “peerness”.
- A peer support worker accepts, understands, and validates the feelings, thoughts and aspirations of others⁴, promoting a sense of belonging, and connection.
- They help to improve the quality of life, encourage growth and empowerment.

“It’s one of the most positive things I’ve done with my mental health recovery. I think about positive things now. People are happy to be here and I am one of them. I like it a lot because it makes me more comfortable with myself and more accepting of others.”

¹ Davidson et al., 2006

² Davidson, et al., 2006; Rivera, Sullivan, & Valenti, 2007; Salzer, 1997; Solomon, 2004

³ Gartner & Riesman, 1982 in Solomon, 2004, p. 393

⁴ Mead & McNeil, 2006

Benefits of Peer Support

- Peers are able to **engage others living with mental health challenges or addictions** in a positive manner, encouraging them to live healthier lives. This helps to reduce hospitalizations, improve overall health and reduce costs for the system⁵.
- Peer work also provides **employment or functional roles** to those living with addiction and/or mental health challenges. This is a critical benefit for peers, who often are unable to find work or relegated to volunteer roles with little significance. Until recently, peer knowledge was not valued or given any status. However, now, by providing an opportunity to contribute to the community, share their experience and knowledge, identify gaps in the health system and provide support, peers have become an important work force that shape and transform the health system.
- Also, evidence shows that peer support can **transform and improve effectiveness of traditional mental health systems** overall⁶. Peers help to reduce the barriers to access traditional systems, remove stereotypes, support sustained service utilization, and help to strengthen the relationship between the provider and client. This has led to making services more sensitive towards the clients. It has also increased the involvement of peers in all areas of health program development and delivery. The impact of peer support on health systems in Alberta is an ongoing part of the evaluation strategy of CMHA Calgary.
- Peer work is complementary to services provided by other mental health stakeholders and expressly do not replace formal treatment. The benefit of peers is how **embedded they are within communities, families, institutions, and contexts**. They operate within these networks as complementary supports, building connection and belonging among peers through their shared experience, and bridging lived experience into health systems.

- Peer workers help to **access hard to reach populations**, such as those facing homelessness, addiction or mental health challenges. Often these groups have faced discrimination or had negative experiences with the traditional system⁷.
- Peer support also helps **family members or the broader community** by improving their understanding of the mental health system and ability to support their loved one's recovery and ability to care for themselves⁸.
- Seeing functional peer workers is **impactful in transforming the attitudes and dismantling the stereotypes** that people and community may have about people living with addiction or mental health challenges⁹.

Peer led services are also cost effective, they are usually significantly less expensive than traditional mental health or rehabilitation services, which is critical given the rising cost of healthcare. Seeing the benefits of peer work has also increased the likelihood of increased funding for such programs.

"It makes me feel not alone—knowing that I can talk to someone without being judged."

CMHA Peer Support Recipient

"In the outside world, I didn't have anything in common, mental healthwise. The approach here is very normalizing."

CMHA Peer Support Recipient

5 Solomon, 2004

6 Ibid

7 Ibid

8 Sunderland & Mishkin, 2013

9 Solomon, 2004

Advancing Peer Support

Peer support has always been an integral pillar of CMHA's programs, which includes training and hiring people with lived experience to provide psycho-social support, case work, group work, or mentorship. CMHA Calgary is a national leader peer support advancing the movement in the following ways:

"I know it's working because people are asking about peer school. That means they see the awareness in themselves, that they can go on their journey make a difference...in someone else's."

72 CLASSROOM HOURS Peer training (72 hours) was originally offered by CMHA for volunteers with a mental health diagnosis, through funding from Calgary Learns under the program "Peer Options". Started in 1999, peers were trained as facilitators, 'recreation mates' and mentors. Peer-volunteers were learning to manage their mental health while working towards independent living. They developed tools to help others while they helped themselves. The training was a unique two-part program whereby graduates moved from the role of learners to mentors or trainers. The program provided a lifelong learning continuum from entry level (as a client of CMHA's Supported Housing and Independent Living Support Programs) to a learner (receiving), to a volunteer (giving back).

A VISION FOR ALBERTA In September 2014, in partnership with Alberta Health Services Strategic Clinical Network, CMHA Calgary conducted a province-wide community consultation on the role of peer support with a broad group of stakeholders. The majority of those providing feedback were individuals with lived experience (peers). One of the key recommendations identified was a desire for peer support certification in order to legitimize the positive impact and role of peer support.

ATTRACTED INVESTMENT In 2015, with increased funding, CMHA began to scale peer support training and formalized training to include Art of Friendship, Art of Recovery, Prairies to Peaks, Caregivers Connections and an internship component.

A SCALABLE TRAINING SOLUTION Taking our learnings from the previous year, in 2016 CMHA launched The School of Peer Support, a formal training program to build skills and competencies among peers who had either lived experience with mental health and/or addictions or had family members who were living with mental health and/or addictions. Peers were provided training in a variety of areas such as mental health, addictions, hope, self-awareness, communication, conflict resolution, problem solving, and recovery, with the goal of embedding them within a variety of settings within the community.

45+ PEER GRADUATES In 2016, CMHA Calgary also began graduating peers from the School of Peer Support. Since, peers have moved into a variety of roles, both within CMHA Calgary and with other partners. In partnership with AHS, peers have been supporting patients and clinicians in the health care system. This is a significant departure in thinking, reflecting a shift from seeing mental health patients as end-users to valued professionals in the health care system. Peers embedded in roles such as these have the potential to decrease pressure on waitlists, supporting timely intervention with needed supports.

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC In 2017 CMHA Calgary expanded its operations to include a Recovery College and a Welcome Centre. Together they serve hundreds of community members every week by providing mental wellbeing and recovery management education, peer support, and referrals. Recovery College provides a broad range of courses that are recovery focused while the Welcome Centre is a welcoming community hub for anyone seeking information on mental health and peer support, or seeking connection.

School of Peer Support

Canadian Mental Health Association Calgary

The CMHA Calgary School of Peer Support aims to train peer workers with lived experience or family experience in mental health and addictions to provide peer support to others in recovery. Understanding the need for complementary support in health systems as well as the impact of peer work from evidence and first-hand experience with Peer Options, CMHA Calgary pivoted in 2016 to offer formalized peer training.

Peer School training is comprised of **course work (discussion style learning), internship placement, and a community of practice. Throughout, peers are supported** by a mentor, meeting regularly to provide support in their journey as a peer and model peer behaviour. The community of practice, an important feature of this school, fosters strong peer-to-peer relationships and encourages co-learning through mutual support. The impact of this peer training model has been evaluated, highlighting the benefits of peer work for the individual, community and the general health system. For peers completing the program:

- There are **improvements in mental health and wellbeing** as a result of the training. Peers typically experience a significant increase in their Mental Health Recovery Measure scores.



- Peers also **developed vocational skills, increasing their capacity to work** as peers in a variety of settings. They developed a range of skills to support and model recovery, instill hope and critical thinking, develop strong relationships, problem solve and provide social support across the community.

- Peers **increased their knowledge about harm reduction and recovery**, learnt coping strategies, how to reframe their thinking, and were better able to manage their mental health/addictions.



- The School afforded participants who for a long-time experienced social isolation and feelings of loneliness the opportunity to **build interpersonal relationships, and a community of support** where they could learn from each other and strengthen their skills.



"[Peer Support] Staff are equal with us. They give us time."

83%

of peer drop-in group participants felt a sense of belonging in their peer group.

85%

of peer group participants intend to participate in another group.



Key Foundations

1. Core Competencies

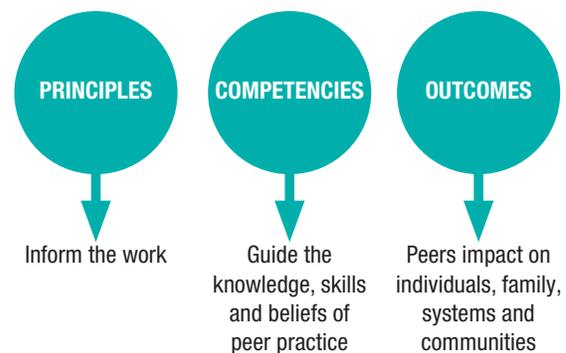
Core competencies are the capacity to perform a role or function and are often described as clusters of knowledge, skills, and attitudes a person needs to successfully perform a role or job.

- **How were they developed?** They were developed early within CMHA Calgary’s School of Peer Support through an evidence-based process that involved multiple stakeholders and drew on multiple sources of information and data (for further information review Peer School Evaluation Report 2017).
- **What do they tell us?** These core competencies reflect what students are learning, the boundaries of their peer work, and how their growth can be assessed over time. For example, in demonstrating hope, one of the core competencies, students are expected to understand the role of hope in recovery (knowledge), use language that displays hope (skills), and show optimism in personal work and life (attitudes).
- **What is their impact?** Core competencies are integrated in the learning objectives of Recovery College courses. When designing course materials for Recovery College, facilitating drop-in groups, or greeting people in the Welcome Centre, peers draw upon their training in these competencies and apply and role-model what they learned so that others may develop these knowledge, skills and attitudes themselves. While anyone with lived experience can enact a peer role, the training provided in the School of Peer Support enhances capacity to succeed as peers and help others. Having competencies integrated in curriculum design in the School of Peer Support means learners are working towards a mix of skill sets that research has shown supports recovery.

2. Principles

Principles ensure that operationally, everything done is aligned with agreed upon goals. Indeed, for competencies to be reached by both peers and learners, principles become the conditions under which they are able to do so.

- **How were they developed?** They were developed through an iterative process that involved both peers and staff. Key principles were first identified best practice and then refined through discussions and workshops (for further information review Peer School Evaluation Report 2017).
- **What do they tell us?** These principles help to keep the programs and services oriented towards commonly agreed upon ideas. They are the goal posts that we can return to in order to assess if the program achieved what it set out to do. For example, inclusivity (principle) fostered through a diverse mix of ideas, people, skills, knowledge and expertise, supports learners to collaborate (competency) and embrace interpersonal relationships that are positive, respectful, and offer mutual support. Principles set the tone and context for competencies to flourish.
- **What is their impact?** Principles are not always visible but underlie all activities and programs of the Recovery College and Welcome Center. Principles are often called upon while designing programs, courses or implementing new ideas. They are much broader than competencies in their intent and focus. Having a ‘principles-based’ approach can support programs to remain true to their initial vision and aims.



Studying Peer Practice

Types of peer support work fall along a spectrum from informal support work to formal peer support within a structured organizational setting¹⁰. Peer practice at **CMHA Calgary is distinguishable by its commitment to peer support philosophy**: peers can model recovery, share lived experience, and support each other by offering hope and friendship. The goal is to empower others along their journey, supporting them through encouragement not fixing, modeling friendship and listening not preaching solutions, and remaining focused on recovery not diagnosis.

Peer Practice at CMHA

Act of being a peer is:

- **Experience driven:** Someone who has ‘experiential’ background in mental health and or addiction.
- **Change agent:** Someone who uses their experience to instill hope, build social connections and belonging.
- **Friendship:** Someone who is a companion or friend and supports others in their recovery journey.

For CMHA Calgary, a peer worker:

- **Provides supports:** Someone who provides social, emotional, psychological, and practical supports to others.
- **Offers growth and connections:** Someone who brings hope, sense of belonging, and builds social connections with others.
- **Empowers:** Someone who works to empower and validate the experiences of others.
- **Develops a sense of self-worth, hope, social connections and belonging.**
- Following a parity model: Peers are employed as core staff, with a living wage and benefits. Peers undertake several roles within the organization including assistance in daily management, social and emotional support, advocacy, developing links to clinical care and community resources, and ongoing social support. Peers can also be involved as volunteers throughout the organization.

Supervision/Mentorship

Peer support is an emerging practice. Mentorship for peers has been identified as a strengths-based practice. While role supervision is imperative for the overall organizational functioning, peers need mentorship to support their practice and to grow professionally.

Mentors have a specific role to play; they can support by sharing their own experience as a peer. They inspire and encourage peers to do more in their practice, stay wellness focused, and provide emotional support with difficult challenges. Peers are encouraged to **remain life-long learners and stay curious about how they can expand** and improve their practice. A strong mentorship relationship can help identify peers’ natural strengths and bring about ways to apply those strengths to their practice.

Outside of CMHA Calgary

The aim of having peers support one another within systems of health care is to begin shifting mental health and addictions practices at the site where the majority of people have their first interaction with the mental health system. This has the greatest possible impact on people experiencing mental health concerns, as they are able to better access the help they need barrier-free and in a timely manner. This has the potential to positively impact the overall health system as **patient care is re-orientated** to include complementary mental health supports such as peers.

¹⁰ Sunderland & Mishkin, 2013

Conclusion

“I went for lunch last week. I haven’t asked someone do anything for 3 years. We had the best time! That was really huge for me.”

Peer support has multiple impacts across individuals, communities, and systems. It shapes individual behaviors and actions, improves well-being and builds social connections, and fosters hope. All of the aforementioned qualities have been observed by Habitus at CMHA Calgary. Moreover, at the community and systems level, peer work is able to invigorate a new way of thinking about recovery, participation of community, and co-development of resources and programs; and creates a more equitable and democratic approach to mental health.

As CMHA Calgary moves from the piloting phase of their Welcome Centre and Recovery College and into solidifying their programmatic approach, **the foundations of their peer practice are solid.** By embedding activities in broader principles and competencies CMHA Calgary’s approach to peer practice is the first in Canada to move peer practice in a way that progress can be measured, and innovation documented. Peer support now not only frames CMHA Calgary’s programmatic focus but also its approach, policies, and community partnerships—a major shift.

Peer support is able to go beyond the capacities and individual behaviours of peers at work to **reshape how systems, institutions, and communities can think about mental health**, recovery, and well-being. Peer Support at CMHA is **characterized as a warm, welcome, inclusive, and non-judgmental environment.** Visitors appreciate the geographic accessibility and interior design, including access to kitchen and free coffee as a gathering point. This environment of inclusion and safety is first modeled by the Peer staff, and then adopted by visitors.

