

People with Lived and Living Experience of Substance Use

Harm Reduction Manual

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First Nations Health Authority
Health through wellness



BC Centre for Disease Control
Provincial Health Services Authority

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Introduction

[People with lived and living experience \(PWLLE\) of substance use](#) are people who have used substances in the past (lived experience) or currently use substances (living experience). Sometimes, PWLLE are called “peers”. PWLLE are central to harm reduction, bringing knowledge and expertise that improves services, shapes healthier drug policies, and builds stronger community networks.^{1,2} Involving people with past experience of substance use as well as people who currently use substances is important to ensure inclusion of diverse experiences across the spectrum of substance use.



Hiring people with lived experience and also **hiring a variety of different people that have current experience and past experience**, because sometimes people can relate a lot more to people who have used fentanyl than someone who hasn't used fentanyl. Someone who has used the current drug supply and understands how much it's changing rather than someone who hasn't used drugs for 20 years. It's important to have a mixture of people and people who can relate to how it is—because it is very different than what it was 20 years ago. For instance, heroin is very different from fentanyl.

You need to hire a diversity of people, backgrounds, skills, and ways of talking to people. **Having people with lived and living experience brings humanity** and someone there that can understand what the person is going through.

-Kali, Member of PEEP



Through leadership and advocacy, PWLLE have made significant changes to policies and services—such as increasing access to [supportive housing](#) and improving access to lifesaving overdose prevention services and safer substance use supplies.³

For many years, PWLLE have called for meaningful involvement in decisions that affect their lives. The principle of “Nothing About Us Without Us,” originally developed by the disability rights movement, has also been used by PWLLE to highlight the importance of including PWLLE in all levels of planning and decision-making.⁴ This principle is also widely used by First Nations people and is reflected in one of FNHA’s core values, highlighting that many mental health and substance use programs have historically been developed without meaningful involvement and consideration of First Nations PWLLE.



When you are talking to people with lived and living experience who work healthcare settings — they get it. It’s like **this lightbulb goes on and they really get it**. It’s amazing when that happens.

-Beth, Member of PEEP



There are many groups of PWLLE involved in advocacy and leadership across BC, such as drug user groups, peer networks, and grassroots organizations. BCCDC works with an advisory board called Professionals for the Ethical Engagement of Peers (PEEP), which is embedded in the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) Harm Reduction and Substance Use Services department to advise on substance use policies and topics. Since 2015, PEEP has provided consultation and advice on harm reduction and substance use policy and services both within BCCDC and other initiatives across BC.²



Hiring people with lived and living experience with a **diversity of experiences and skills** is so important. Also, having people with lived and living experience in leadership roles. **Not just tokenistic roles**, but in roles with decision making power and mentoring professionals.

-Amber, Member of PEEP



Involving PWLLE in drug policy and programming is gaining support as a necessary part of developing policy and programming.² To do meaningful work with PWLLE, organizations and groups must take action to build respectful, supportive, and equitable partnerships.

PEEP developed the Peer Engagement Principles and Best Practices (2017) to help BC Health Authorities to meaningfully engage PWLLE in service planning and delivery. This guide identifies 7 principles for meaningful engagement with PWLLE, outlined in a visual on the next page.⁵

7 Principles for Meaningful Engagement with People With Lived and Living Experience

Peers as Experts

Value people's expertise by centering their voices in decisions and paying people fairly.

Equity

Acknowledge different barriers people face and take action to address differences in power.

Diversity

Involve people with different experiences and voices. Use approaches that meet people's changing needs.

Transparency

Openly share processes, decisions, and outcomes.

Accountability

Share reasons for decisions and be accountable for decisions.

Shared Decision-Making Power

Involve people in all aspects of decision making.

Increasing Capacity

Support people to develop skills, knowledge, goals, and confidence.

Resources

The following resources can help service providers and policymakers to meaningfully engage and collaborate with PWLLE of substance use:

- [Peer Engagement Principles and Best Practices \(2017\)](#) for guidance on how to meaningfully engage PWLLE in policy and programming decisions. Note: new guidance is in development.
- [Paying Peers in Community Based Work \(2018\)](#) for guidance on paying PWLLE for community work.
- [Peer Payment Standards \(2018\)](#) for guidance on paying PWLLE for short-term engagements.
- [How to Involve People Who Use Drugs](#) for an infographic on do's and don'ts of engaging PWLLE.
- [Toward the Heart Peer Engagement Resources](#) for various resources on peer engagement practices and compensation.
- [Toward the Heart Peer Engagement Projects](#) for information on peer engagement projects.
- [BC Peer Worker Training](#) for a curriculum developed for and by PWLLE to develop skills in leadership, peer support, and drug poisoning (overdose) response.

Glossary

Decriminalization refers to drug policies in which possessing small amounts of certain substances is no longer a criminal offense. Substances remain illegal, but people carrying small amounts for personal use are not punished through the criminal justice system.

People with lived and living experience (PWLE) of substance use refers to people who have used substances in the past (lived experience) and people who currently use substances (living experience). Sometimes referred to as “peers”.

Supportive housing refers to a type of housing that is affordable and includes health or social supports (such as a housing worker).

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