



LIVED EXPERIENCE WORKFORCE PROGRAM

Recruitment and Retention: Lived Experience/Peer Workforce

About this Document

This document provides an overview of the importance of best practice in Recruitment and Retention of mental health Lived Experience/Peer Workers (LEWs). It gives a snapshot of what the recruitment process would look like and strategies to retain this workforce.

LEWP has co-produced a set of **NGO Mental Health Lived Experience Workforce Standards and Guidelines** which go into greater depth. They are designed as a self-assessment tool, for organisations to measure themselves against best practice in recruitment, retention and growth of their Lived Experience Workforce. A gap analysis is conducted, and an Action Plan developed, with clear actions and strategies for addressing any gaps.

There are three versions available, to meet the diverse needs of your workforce:

- Mainstream/LGBTIQA+ Lived Experience Workforce
- Aboriginal Lived Experience Workforce
- CALD Lived Experience Workforce

These, and details of all our activities can be accessed at any time from our website. Contact LEWP for support to get started with your implementation. <https://mhcsa.org.au/lived-experience-workforce-program/>

Background

Best practice in recruitment is vital to the success of the Lived Experience (Peer Work) role within an organisation. It doesn't just start with a fantastic Job Description or Job Advertisement. Success also depends on the organisational readiness and preparation before actual recruitment even begins.

“There is a difference between possessing this lived experience and having the skills and the motivation to provide the services of a consumer or carer expert in a professional capacity.”¹

Not everyone who has a lived experience of mental distress and recovery will be an effective Peer Worker. Simply having lived experience is not enough. It takes a great deal of insight and reflection, appropriate training, skills development and ongoing support to fine tune the Lived Experience skill set (knowledge and application to practice, within the frameworks of peer work).

In the early days of Peer Work in SA, research found that the employment experiences of Peer Workers varied. Some reported that they felt valued, supported and that their organisation had been well prepared for the role. Others had negative experiences. For example, feeling as though they had to “prove themselves” to other staff in order for the role

¹ Mental Health Consumer & Carer Forum, 2010 in 'Mental health peer workforce competency development – Scoping report October 2010', Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council

to be accepted; something that it was “...too hard without support”.² Across Australia, “many position descriptions ‘were found to have evolved in an ad-hoc fashion with an absence of guidelines or clarity about aims and functions and often minimal support and resourcing’. However despite the disparity found between position descriptions, the purpose of all positions was significantly similar; to improve services for people experiencing mental health through the support of workers who have a lived experience as a service user.”³

Recruitment and Retention of Your Lived Experience/Peer Workforce

As mentioned previously, the LEWP NGO Mental Health Lived Experience Workforce Standards and Guidelines provides clear examples of strategies in practice and is a valuable tool for guiding organisations in best practice when it comes to recruiting, supporting and growing their workforce. The LEWP Reference Group has co-designed the following considerations for organisations to get you thinking about your current practices and potential areas for development.

Workforce planning

Evidence referred to earlier in this document shows that organisational understanding and preparation is critical to the success of the peer work role. Consider the following strategies:

- Including Lived Experience representation in your Governance.
- Articulating the value of lived experience and designated lived experience roles within your Strategic Plan.
- Outlining strategies and actions to employ and support the Lived Experience Workforce within the organisation’s Workforce Development Plan.
- Supporting senior leaders and managers through training, mentoring and other support mechanisms to understand the Lived Experience Workforce and how to recruit, lead and support workers. For example:
 - Trauma Informed Leadership
 - Understanding the background of peer work, guiding frameworks and how it differs/intersects with other roles in the organisation
 - Understanding what lived experience as a skill set is
- Reviewing policies and procedures to ensure they consider the Lived Experience. For example:
 - Confidentiality: being in a lived experience role automatically identifies the person as someone who has experienced/continues to live with or has cared for someone experiencing mental distress. Who chooses what, how and when (if at all) to disclose aspects of this as part of the role? What does peer practice say about this? What, if anything, does the person want to share/keep private?
- Ensuring casual workers feel valued as part of the team by treating them the same as other staff. For example:
 - Access to resources to do their job effectively as should happen with any staff member - a workspace, work email address, access to IT facilities, invitations to team meetings, participating in supervision and mentoring (including peer supervision and lived experience professional development), opportunities for reflective practice with other Lived Experience Workers

² ©2008 BCS & SACHRU ‘Endpoint report of BCS Peer Support Project Evaluation – Integrating peer work into workplaces’

³ ‘Mental health peer workforce competency development – Scoping report October 2010’, Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council

- Considering opportunities for recruiting Lived Experience Workers beyond contractual obligations. For example, when someone leaves a non-lived experience role:
 - How could that role be shaped to become a lived experience role?
 - What value would that bring to the role – for participants, the team, the workplace?
- Reviewing recruitment and retention strategies and plans for Lived Experience Workforce (in co-design with lived experience expertise):
 - During the plan development phase, including strategic, workforce and operational planning
 - In program design
 - When reviewing the above plans
- Reflecting on the milestones or review points in the role of a Lived Experience Worker. For example:
 - Starting work
 - Learning the role
 - Ongoing support and supervision including lived experience practice-specific
 - Development and growth (e.g. professional development including lived experience practice-specific, career progression)

Recruitment

a) Advertisement and position information

When considering the job advertisement and information for applicants, such as the Job Description, think about:

- Including an organisational statement around valuing lived experience
- Language: what are you saying about lived experience? Are you portraying an organisation that:
 - Is a safe place for people with lived experience to work (trauma-informed)
 - Does not see lived experience as a risk but a strength
 - Uses non-medical model language
 - Is driven by values?
- Clearly defining lived experience of mental distress and recovery as a skill set, as it applies to the role (i.e. ability to apply learning from lived experience into practice)
- Stating the level of qualification the organisation is looking for, including the benchmark qualification for peer work roles (the Certificate IV in Mental Health Peer Work). Consider level of experience and willingness to obtain this qualification
- Cover specific conditions such as salary, hours and flexibility relevant to that role

b) Interviewing

We want people to be as relaxed as possible for the interview process. Some applicants may be coming into the workforce after a period of not working. Others may be considering identifying publicly as someone with lived experience for the first time. Applicants, and interview panels, may share concerns about how to approach questions relating to lived experience. Others may simply be experiencing the normal levels of anxiety that we all experience when faced with an interview!

Organisations can support interviewees to feel as comfortable as possible by:

- Ensuring there is someone with lived experience on the panel, who has also been involved in shaping the questions (preferably someone who understands the role, application of lived experience knowledge to practice in peer work etc.)
- Letting people know ahead of time what the panel will look like, the names of the panel members and that there will be someone with lived experience and expertise in a similar role present
- Gauging from the application whether the person may have been out of the workforce for a period of time and tailor some respectful questions about re-entering the workforce
- Giving people a chance to view the interview questions before the interview if possible, e.g. 15 minutes before the interview
- As well as other essential skills of the role, ask for examples about lived experience skills – work-related or personal scenario-based questions often work well. For example:
 - Peer Work guiding frameworks e.g. Values and Principles
 - Understanding of lived experience as a skill set (knowledge into practice)
 - How the person would apply their lived experience skill set within the role being applied for
 - Understanding of recovery and wellbeing and how to support this for others
 - Self-management responsibilities and strategies
 - How to explain the concept of recovery to someone else
 - Boundaries, professionalism, safe and purposeful disclosure
 - Difference between non-lived experience support worker and ‘peer’ worker roles; intersectionality with other roles
 - Mental health system and services
 - Advocacy
 - Ethical dilemmas and problem solving
- Interviewing to the criteria but assess on more than questions – e.g. body language, eye contact with the lived experience panel member, active involvement in networks/ other activities etc.
- Making space for the person to articulate and demonstrate their own personal, unique skills and strengths
- Personal and professional achievements the person is proud of

b) After the interview

- Candidates who have been interviewed but were not successful in winning the position should receive a follow up phone call. Offering constructive feedback will help them in their ongoing job search
- For the successful candidate:
 - Clearly articulate what happens next and when
 - Let them know how long the probationary period is and how the process will be managed
 - Discuss workplace considerations – e.g. flexible/reasonable adjustments. Provide written information
 - Ensure the person knows who to call with any general questions prior to commencing, such as HR or the role’s direct supervisor

- If the application information included a remuneration range (e.g. 'Award Level X or Y, depending on experience' etc.), be clear about the salary level being offered to the person and why
- Have a good orientation and induction plan which includes meeting others, learning about the various roles and programs and some down time to absorb everything! Alleviate first-day anxiety by clearly outlining the process: start date, time, place, parking, who to meet, desk, lunch and coffee arrangements etc.

c) Induction and orientation

- Prepare the organisation prior to recruitment. Train teams so they understand the purpose, responsibilities and value of the lived experience role and how to work together
- Clarity of role: work with the person to translate the requirements of the Job Description and their other unique strengths, experience and skills into a Duty Statement and Action Plan that meet the needs of the contract, organisation, team and program. Clarify the organisation's expectations
- Ensure organisational orientation clearly articulates the values, skill set and role definition attributed to lived experience positions
- Think about workplace culture and environment. Is it warm and welcoming? Is it safe (trauma-informed)?
- Ensure the person has a place to belong (workspace) and resources to do their job to the best of their ability as noted above
- The person should have access to organisational documents to help familiarise them with the workplace: policies, procedures, a list of organisational acronyms and so on
- Provide access to another lived experience staff member of the person's choice to act as peer mentor and ensure practice-specific peer supervision and professional development forms part of the role
- All staff working in mental health programs/ teams (including those in leadership positions) should receive training in Trauma Informed Care.

Retention

- Provide managers and leaders with training, expert guidance and support in leading and line supervising Lived Experience Workers. This includes understanding the importance of separate peer supervision, delivered by an experienced Peer Supervisor, and how this intersects with Line Management Supervision
- Provide access to lived experience-specific professional development, through external or internal resources e.g.:
 - Peer supervision
 - Reflective practice opportunities e.g. through a Community of Practice
- Co-produce lived experience-related in-house training for all staff, with the Lived Experience Workforce
- Ensure expectations about reasonable adjustments are clear, documented and agreed between the Lived Experience Worker and their manager
- Address support mechanisms for all staff, including lived experience positions, during supervision
- Support Lived Experience Workers to obtain the Certificate IV in Mental Health Peer Work if they don't have it. Refer to LEWP's Guide to Recognition of Prior Learning to

support workers to consider any RPL they may be eligible for, and how you can help them to navigate the process with the training provider

- Have regular team meetings to bring colleagues together. Link with other programs and teams to build internal referral pathways, cross-program collaboration etc.
- Ensure casual workers feel valued as part of the team by treating them the same as other staff. Refer to examples in 'Workforce Planning'
- Plan for and regularly discuss career pathways:
 - What roles would the person like to work towards? What are the options?
 - How does the organisation support people to build skills and knowledge?
 - What is the process for regularly reviewing career progression?

Professional Development for Lived Experience Workers and their Leaders

Lived Experience Workers have identified⁴ that they value and want ongoing professional development around their Lived Experience expertise, as it is a vital component of feeling valued and supported in their role.

The foundation of effective recruitment and retention is values. Many people in the mental health sector including Lived Experience Workers, operate from a very strong values base which has been honed through their own illness and recovery journey. Skilled and trained Lived Experience Workers have a strong sense of self and through practice and are accustomed to the self-reflection required to manage their wellbeing/work-life balance.

The Certificate IV in Mental Health Peer Work is based on the values and principles that underpin peer work. It is the only mental health qualification that specifically focusses on developing the lived experience skill set, appropriately preparing people to enter the Lived Experience Workforce and effectively utilise this specialist skill. LEWP has co-designed a **Guide to Recognition of Prior Learning**, designed at supporting existing Peer Workers and people considering a career in peer work, to reflect on their own situation and plan a pathway towards obtaining the qualification. For example:

- Moving from a volunteer role into a paid peer work position
- Someone who has no mental health training, who identifies as having live experience and is seeking employment in mental health
- Someone who has a Certificate III in Individual support, is working in an entry-level role, who identifies as having live experience and wants to progress to other positions

The LEWP co-produces professional development sessions for Lived Experience Workers and for their Leaders. Details are on our website and include:

- Workshops for Lived Experience Workers
- Community of Practice for Line Managers of Lived Experience Workforce
- Training Workshops for Line Managers of Lived Experience Workforce (fee-for-service)
- External peer supervision (fee-for-service)
- Peer Mentoring Group for Peer Supervisors
- Standards and Guidelines information session for organisations
- Overview of Peer Work information session for organisations

Visit our website <https://mhcsa.org.au/lived-experience-workforce-program/>

⁴ E.g. through 2015 LEWP Training Needs Analysis and 2018 LEWP LEW Professional Development Survey