



# THE ROLE AND VALUE OF PEER WORK

3 JUNE 2021

Prepared by the Consumers of Mental Health WA

## BACKGROUND

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June 2021, a joint Consultation Meeting of the Western Australian Peer Support Network (WAPSN) and the Western Australian Peer Support Community of Practice (COP) was held in response to discussions at the Parliament of Australia House of Representatives Select Committee of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention into the nature and safety of Peer Work. Matters raised in the Select Committee hearing included evidence base for Peer Work; training, regulation and supervision requirements; autonomy and scope of practice; and a potential danger to patients that a Peer Support Workforce could pose in certain circumstances.

There were over fifty participants in the meeting including members of the WA Peer Workforce and those who support Peer approaches.

### What is Peer Work?

Peer Workers are individuals who work in roles where it is essential that they have a shared experience or identity with the people they support or represent. Peer Workers can be paid staff, self-employed or volunteers.

Peer Work is a distinct occupation, with its own values, frameworks, and practices. Peer Workers are employed based on their lived experience, however, lived experience is not sufficient to the role. Peer Workers unique value comes from their ability to reflect on their lived experience and share their experiences with purpose and intention.

Peer Support Work involves supporting consumers or carers/families in their growth, development, and wellbeing. Peer support has been shown to help people to grow in confidence, feel accepted and valued, adjust and adapt to change<sup>1</sup>, create hope and recovery<sup>2,3</sup>, increase their knowledge<sup>4</sup>, resources and skills, increase help seeking behaviour<sup>5,6</sup>, make positive life changes<sup>7</sup>, and have stronger social connections<sup>8</sup>.

In addition to Peer Support Workers, members of the Peer Workforce include Peer Educators, Peer Researchers, Lived Experience Advocates, Peer Navigators and Peer Advisors.

Peer support is recognised globally as an essential recovery service for people with mental health conditions<sup>9</sup>. The development of peer support work and the implementation in the mental healthcare system has made progress in many countries due to changes in healthcare policies towards patient-centeredness<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Davidson L, Bell C, Guy K, Miller R. Peer support among persons with severe mental illnesses: A review of evidence and experience. *World Psychiatry*.11;2 2012, Pages 123-128

<sup>2</sup> Yeung, W.S., Hancock, N., Honey, A. *et al.* Igniting and Maintaining Hope: The Voices of People Living with Mental Illness. *Community Ment Health J* 56, 1044–1052 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10597-020-00557-z>

<sup>3</sup> Simmons, M.B., Grace, D., Fava, N.J. *et al.* The Experiences of Youth Mental Health Peer Workers over Time: A Qualitative Study with Longitudinal Analysis. *Community Ment Health J* 56, 906–914 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10597-020-00554-2>

<sup>4</sup> Milliard B. Utilization and Impact of Peer-Support Programs on Police Officers' Mental Health. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 14 July 2020

<sup>5</sup>Natalie Cheesmond N, Davies K, Inder K The role of the peer support worker in increasing rural mental health help-seeking. *Australian Journal of Mental Health*: 12 April 2020 <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajr.12603>

<sup>6</sup> Milliard B. Utilization and Impact of Peer-Support Programs on Police Officers' Mental Health. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 14 July 2020 <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01686>

<sup>7</sup> Davidson L, Bell C, Guy K, Miller R. Peer support among persons with severe mental illnesses: A review of evidence and experience. *World Psychiatry*.11;2 2012, Pages 123-128

<sup>8</sup> Op cit

<sup>9</sup> Fortuna K, Naslund JA, LaCroix JM *et al.* Digital peer support mental health interventions for people with a lived experience of a serious mental illness: systemic review. *JMIR Mental Health*. <https://mental.jmir.org/2020/4/e16460/>

<sup>10</sup> Nossek A, Werning A, Otte I *et al.* Evolvement of Peer Support Workers' Roles in Psychiatric Hospitals: A Longitudinal Qualitative Observation Study *Community Ment Health J* 57, 589–597 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10597-020-00741-1>

The internationally growing trend to adopt Peer Support Services within addiction and mental health services has shown that, despite the ongoing challenges, large sections of the current literature support the inclusion of peer support workers in the mental health care workforce<sup>11,12</sup>.

As with other occupations, continuing professional development contributes to ensuring that members of the Peer Workforce maintain and grow their expertise and competence. Peer supervision provided by someone with their own lived experience focuses on ensuring fidelity to the values, tools, frameworks, and practices of Peer Work as an occupation.

## Methodology

The meeting was structured as two table-based discussions with groups providing summaries and reporting back to the meeting with their key points.

Two key topics were discussed:

1. What is the value of Peer Work?
2. What should politicians be discussing regarding Peer Work?

From these several key messages were extracted.

## OUTCOMES OF THE CONSULTATION MEETING

### Key messages

- Peer Work is beneficial to consumers for the following key reasons:
  - Peer Workers are uniquely positioned to validate the experiences of consumers and/or carers and families.
  - Peer Workers have a wealth of invaluable knowledge and expertise, due to their lived experience of mental health challenges and recovery.
  - Peer Workers provide a beacon of hope for societal inclusion and act as living examples of recovery for consumers.
- Peer Work has an impact that extends beyond their influence on consumers. Peer Work has benefits for the friends, family, carers, and broader community that surround the consumer.
- An effective and strong Peer Workforce should be supported through government investment in Peer Work development.

### The unique benefits of Peer Work.

Three key benefits of Peer Work were identified by the participants of the Consultation Meeting.

#### 1 Validation of Experience

*“Peer Workers share with courage. They are not separate. They recognise themselves in the other person.”*

Peer Workers are uniquely placed to validate the experiences of the consumer due to their shared lived experience. Participants of the Consultation Meeting identified the following benefits to the recipients of Peer Work:

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<sup>11</sup> Shalaby RA, Agyapong VI. Peer Support in Mental Health: Literature Review. JMIR Publication Advancing Digital Health and Open Science. Vol 7, No 6 (2020) June [https://mental.jmir.org/2020/6/e15572/?utm\\_source=TrendMD&utm\\_medium=cpc&utm\\_campaign=JMIR\\_TrendMD\\_1](https://mental.jmir.org/2020/6/e15572/?utm_source=TrendMD&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=JMIR_TrendMD_1)

<sup>12</sup> Simpson A, Oster C, Muir-Cochrane E. Liminality in the occupational identity of mental health peer support workers: A qualitative study International Journal of Mental Health Nursing. First published: 26 May 2017

- Consumers and carers feel that Peer Workers are safe to talk to and are thus more likely to be open and honest with Peer Workers as they can understand and validate their experiences without shame or stigma.
- Having a shared Lived Experience allows for a more authentic connection and rapport to develop between the consumer and the Peer Worker.
- Due to shared Lived Experience, Peer Workers can build trust and rapport with consumers faster and thus achieve improved outcomes within a more limited time frame.
- Peer Workers are well placed to view consumers as “more than just a diagnosis” and thus, are better able to foster an environment that is equitable and holistic.
- Peer Workers understand and can validate the experiences of consumers with mental health services. Engaging with a Peer Worker can assist first-time consumers to feel safe engaging with a mental health service.

## **2 Invaluable knowledge and expertise**

*“Peer Workers provide a human voice – they are advocates in the purest sense of the word.”*

Peer Workers bring invaluable knowledge and expertise which brings benefits to consumers, carers and organisations. Feedback from the Consultation Meeting members identified the benefits of the Peer Workers knowledge and expertise:

- Peer Workers can draw on their direct experience of recovery, to implement and understand recovery-oriented practice.
- Peer Workers have a wealth of knowledge on recovery and wellbeing to share with consumers and carers that can only be gained through Lived Experience.
- The advice and knowledge of Peer Workers is likely to be better received by consumers as it is provided by a trusted Peer.
- The shared experiences and understanding of the Peer Workers can facilitate consumers to engage in services and support.
- Peer Workers provide invaluable advice and insight to clinical teams to supplement their wealth of clinical experience – making clinical service more consumer-friendly and informed.

## **3 Source of hope**

*“The Peer Worker is an inspiration and a role model for recovery and wellbeing.”*

Peer Workers, when they are respected and valued by communities and government, provide a source of hope for consumers. Peer and that inclusion and respect by the broader community are possible. The benefits of the Peer Workforce being a source of hope were identified in the Consultation Meeting as follows:

- Consumers are emboldened in their journey by the recovery story of the Peer Worker.
- Peer Workers are a living example to consumers and carers that recovery and wellbeing are achievable.
- Peer Workers model healthy behaviours for the consumer and act as a living embodiment of the power and benefits of recovery.
- By engaging with consumers, Peer Workers are exposed to other people’s inspiring journeys of recovery and wellbeing. This can encourage the Peer Workers to continue their own recovery journey and be used intentionally in their Peer Work to inspire hope in others.
- Consumers, especially those who have faced discrimination and stigma, can experience hope of inclusion and respect when they observe Peer Workers being respected and valued by their organisation, government, and community.

## The broader impact of Peer Work.

*“Peer Work is empowering for all. It provides space for people to grow mutually.”*

Peer Work not only provides immense and unique benefits to consumers, it offers a wide range of benefits to the community. Key benefits to the community identified in the Consultation Meeting are:

- When Peer Workers are respected and valued, the stigma and shame associated with mental health difficulties is challenged. This shows others in the community that people with Lived Experience are valuable, useful members of society, who deserve respect.
- Better health outcomes for consumers at a lower cost.
- The provision of non-judgmental, safe, and informed mental health care.
- Decreased hospital re-admissions, lengths of stay and co-occurring difficulties.

## RECOMMENDED PEER WORKFORCE INVESTMENT PRIORITIES

*“Politicians should act on the advice and expertise coming from the voices of people with lived experience!”*

### **We call on the Australian Government to:**

- 1 Retract Mr Roddams statement in the House of Representatives Select Committee of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention on 3 June 2021 that there is a potential danger to patients that a Peer Support Workforce could pose in certain circumstances.

This statement is potentially stigmatizing and discriminatory for members of the Peer Workforce; may induce fear and a lack of trust in mental health consumers; and stands to derail the progress of implementing contemporary evidence-based peer support models into Australian mental health services.

- 2 Support a strong and effective Peer Workforce by implementing the following investment priorities:
  - A. Strengthen and support the Peer Workforce by ensuring access for appropriate Peer Supervision.
  - B. Strengthen and support the Peer Workforce by funding flexible and appropriate Peer Work training, including further professional development.
  - C. Strengthen the Peer Workforce by providing once-off, seed funding to create a professional association for Peer Workers
  - D. Support research to continue to build the evidence base for the Peer Workforce.
  - E. Collaborate with State and Territory Governments to develop a program to educate health professionals about the role and value of Peer Workers in improving outcomes.
  - F. Legislative protections for Peer Workers akin to those for other medical professionals.

## KEY AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT RESEARCH and REPORTS

### **Productivity Commission Inquiry Report into Australia's Mental Health System<sup>13</sup>**

**(Recommendation 16 of 24)** The Australian Government should strengthen the peer workforce by providing once-off, seed funding to create a professional association for peer workers, and in collaboration with State and Territory Governments, develop a program to educate health professionals about the role and value of peer workers in improving outcomes. (Action 16.5)

### **Peer workforce role in mental health and suicide prevention<sup>14</sup>**

Peer workers draw on their lived experience to play unique roles in encouraging and supporting the recovery of people experiencing mental health issues by:

- Offering hope and supporting consumers and carers to develop a recovery-oriented perspective
- Supporting consumers and carers to develop important life skills
- Supporting consumers and carers to move beyond being a patient or carer to develop a personal sense of empowerment
- Empathising with consumers and carers from a position of experience.

### **National Mental Health Commission: Contributing lives, thriving communities<sup>15</sup>**

Mental health peer workers are needed, particularly for those people with severe and complex mental illness. This group is a key component of recovery-oriented mental health services and also can play an important role in suicide prevention.

### **Health Workforce Australia: Mental Health Peer Workforce Study (Australian Government Initiative)<sup>16</sup>**

People with mental illness are amongst the most socially and economically marginalised members of the community. In addition to their illness, they may experience loss of employment, family breakdown and other difficulties. Stigmatising attitudes are still evident in the community and the media, and discrimination can create further problems. Peer workers appear uniquely placed to assist people using mental health services, and their families and carers.

### **National Mental Health Commission's development of a 'Vision 2030 for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention' focus areas for mental health workforce improvement<sup>17</sup>**

3.27 - The role of a peer worker is to complement the skills and expertise of mental health professionals. They are able to bring a level of understanding of what people using mental health services experience, assist with the navigation through what can be a complex system, and provide emotional and social support.

## Definitions

**Peer Work:** Peer Workers are individuals who are employed on the basis of their personal lived experience of mental health conditions and recovery.

<sup>13</sup> King, S., Abramson, J., & Whiteford, H. (2020). Productivity Commission Inquiry Report. Retrieved from website: <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health/report/mental-health-volume1.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Peer workforce role in mental health and suicide prevention. (n.d.). Retrieved from [www1.health.gov.au](http://www1.health.gov.au) website: <https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/2126B045A8DA90FDCA257F6500018260/>

<sup>15</sup> National Mental Health Commission. (n.d.). Contributing lives, thriving communities: Report of the National Review of Mental Health Programmes and Services Volume 2. Retrieved from website: <https://mhfa.com.au/sites/default/files/vol2-review-mh-programmes-services.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Health Workforce Australia. (2014). Mental Health Peer Workforce Study. Retrieved from website: <http://www.mhcsa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/HWA-Mental-health-Peer-Workforce-Study.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Emerging Themes of the Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Interim Report from the Select Committee on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention. Retrieved from section 3.27:

[https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House/Mental\\_Health\\_and\\_Suicide\\_Prevention/MHSP/Interim\\_Report/section?id=committee\\_s%2Freportrep%2F024668%2F76262#footnote3target](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Mental_Health_and_Suicide_Prevention/MHSP/Interim_Report/section?id=committee_s%2Freportrep%2F024668%2F76262#footnote3target)

**Peer Supervision:** By a person with lived experience to a person with lived experience which supports the supervisee in them in their role to avoid peer drift.

**Peer Work Values:** Mutuality; Voluntary Engagement; Self-Determination; Hope; Responsibility; Empowerment.

**Lived Experience:** The knowledge an individual gains first-hand from their personal experiences, choices, emotions, difficulties, and triumphs. In the context of this summary, it refers to the lived experience of mental health issues.

**Learned experience:** The knowledge an individual gains second-hand from formal or informal education. In the context of this summary, it refers to the learned experience of mental health issues.

**Recovery-oriented practice:** A mental health practice that involves identifying and applying an individual's strengths to support their individual definition of wellbeing, in alignment with their goals, wishes and aspirations.

## Further reading

Bellamy, C., Schmutte, T., & Davidson, L. (2017). An update on the growing evidence base for peer support. *Mental Health and Social Inclusion*, 20(3), 001-007. doi: 10.1108/MHSI-03-2017-0014

Davidson, L., & Guy, K. (2012). Peer support among persons with severe mental illnesses: a review of evidence and experience. *World psychiatry*, 11(2), 123-128. doi: 10.1016/j.wpsyc.2012.05.009

Health Workforce Australia. (2014). *Mental Health Peer Workforce Study*. -

WA Peer Supporters' Network. (2018). *The Peer Workforce Report: Mental Health and Alcohol and Other Drug Services*.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5cbec5be7a1fbd1c3c41ca41/t/5ce271c82cb6cf0001531544/1558344146347/The-Peer-Workforce-Report-2018.pdf>