

PeerWorks

Annual Report

2023-2024



Message from PeerWorks' Director

Dear PeerWorks Community,

I am so delighted to share that we had another exciting year and accomplished great things together. Our commitment to advancing Peer Support in Ontario has never been stronger, and I want to highlight some key moments that have shaped our journey.

On May 8th, 2023, our visit to Queen's Park was a significant milestone. Alongside representatives from our member organizations, we engaged with Members of Provincial Parliament to raise awareness about the vital role of community-based Peer Support Organizations (PSOs). During our discussions, I emphasized the unique contributions of Consumer Survivor Initiatives (CSIs) and the critical need for funding and collaboration within our healthcare system. The unwavering support expressed by Honorable Michael Tibollo, MPP Lisa Gretzky, and MPP Jamie West reinforces our belief that change is possible. I am optimistic that these discussions will lead to further engagement and increased recognition of peer support organizations within Ontario's healthcare framework.

This year, we also held our first in-person annual conference since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, which served as a powerful reminder of our vibrant community. With sessions that covered the historical roots of the psychiatric survivor movement and the challenges faced by gender-diverse peers, we fostered rich dialogues about the future of peer support.

We also held our fourth annual Peer Support Strong Conference with Lived Experience & Recovery Network. This year's theme was Peer Support Revolution, which discussed how far we have come and what is next. A key panel from this day included representatives from the University of Toronto, Nipissing University, and Laurentian University, highlighting the innovative peer support programs being implemented on their campuses. This discussion emphasized the growing recognition of peer support in health and wellness services across Ontario.

As we look forward, PeerWorks remains dedicated to amplifying the voices of peer support organizations at the provincial level. We will continue to advocate for systemic change, ensuring that the lived experiences of our community are central to policy and planning processes. Our mission is clear: to strengthen and promote diverse peer voices in Ontario through community building, information sharing, collaboration, advocacy, and education.

Thank you for your steadfast commitment and passion for peer support. Together, we are shaping a brighter future for our communities.

In solidarity,

Allyson Theodorou
Operations Director

Message from PeerWorks Board President

On behalf of the PeerWorks Board of Directors, I would like to begin by thanking each of you for contributing to another successful year at PeerWorks. Your dedication, recognition of the importance of Peer Support and lived/living experience, and the steady support from our government partners all reinforce why PeerWorks remains committed to advancing our work on behalf of the sector every day.

As I reflect on my third year as Chair of PeerWorks' Board of Directors, 2024 has been a pivotal year of dreaming, innovating, and pushing for a comprehensive long-term vision for the Peer Support sector. I am grateful to my colleagues on the board for their time, knowledge, and passion. Each Director has been key in keeping our organization's vision fresh, relevant, and optimistic.

Our Operations Director, Allyson Theodorou, continues to be the backbone of PeerWorks, leading day-to-day operations and advocating for the sector's long-term needs. We often marvel at how much she accomplishes with limited resources.

The scarcity and capacity of resources are a reality across the Peer Support sector, and our members have been feeling the impact in their organizations and local communities. This reality has driven our advocacy and strategic planning at PeerWorks.

Over the past 18 months, the Board held candid conversations about the feasibility of completing our 2020-2023 Strategic Plan commitments. To ensure responsible stewardship, we pivoted from the formal plan in its last year. We identified priority operational functions and created a targeted annual roadmap to guide decision-making, tracking progress clearly and transparently.

I'm proud to share that our open, engaged discussions led to the launch of a new 10-year Strategic Planning cycle, with focused priorities. We look forward to sharing more about this in the months ahead. One key area of focus is the review of our Board's Governance framework. As a not-for-profit committed to transparency and accountability, our values begin with the Board. We are working to enhance our governance practices to be best in class for our sector. This includes new evaluation tools and key performance metrics, which will strengthen PeerWorks' policies and processes. Additionally, with changing regulatory requirements, we will be updating PeerWorks' by-laws to ensure compliance.

We look forward to sharing updates on our Governance Framework in future member communications and Annual Reports.

Sincerely,
Andrea Schaefer

Our Mission

PeerWorks' mission is to strengthen and promote diverse peer voices in Ontario, through community building, information-sharing, collaboration, advocacy, and education.

Our Vision

A world in which lived experience is valued, peer autonomy and peer culture are protected, diversity is respected, and peer support is available to all.

Our Values

Hope and Wellness/Recovery

PeerWorks believes in the right of each individual to self determine their own approach to wellness/recovery and to learn from their peers.

Diversity as Strength

PeerWorks advocates for social justice, equity, anti-oppression, anti-racism, and inclusion. We respect and value all people and embrace diverse experiences related to race, religion, spirituality, ethnicity, gender identity, age, class, income, sexual identity, disability, geographic location, and unique life experiences.

Integrity, Transparency, and Honesty

PeerWorks acts with integrity, transparency, and honesty in all its relationships and partnerships.

Independent Peer Voice

PeerWorks is member-driven and rooted in and accountable to the history of the Consumer/Survivor movement and sustaining an independent, peer voice.

Lived Experience and Experiential Knowledge

PeerWorks values lived experience and the skills and knowledge gained through experiencing mental health and/or substance use concerns, and navigating systems and related systemic barriers, stigma, and discrimination.

Innovation through Partnership and Collaboration

PeerWorks is committed to building and fostering an innovative peer community through partnership and collaboration. We are stronger together than alone.

Communication Highlights

Effective communication was a cornerstone of our advocacy efforts, helping to raise awareness about the value of peer support and ensuring that the voices of those with lived experience were heard. One of the main ways we do this is through our weekly newsletter, NewsToGo, which has over 1000 subscribers. This year, we reached our vibrant community in the following ways:

Format	Amount
NewsToGo	49
Facebook	34
X (Formerly Twitter)	46
Membership Communiques	11

Empowered Narratives Series

This year, we invited people with lived experience to contribute their blogs and other creative expressions sharing their journeys of overcoming mental health and substance use challenges. Submissions for this series, “Empowered Narratives”, are included in our NewstoGo on a monthly basis. Selected submissions receive a \$125 honorarium.

Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression Framework

We are committed to incorporating an anti-racism and anti-oppression framework into our work on an ongoing basis, ensuring that all members have access to best practices and a comprehensive toolkit. To support this effort, the PeerWorks’ Board of Directors has agreed to engage a consultant who will guide us in embedding this framework throughout our practices and operations. This initiative will help us foster a more inclusive and equitable environment for our members and the communities we serve.

Trainings and Discussion Series

PeerWorks Peer Support Essentials™ Training Program

In the past year, we held seven PeerWorks Peer Support Core Essentials™ training sessions, each consisting of 17 two-hour webinars. These sessions included a mix of individual exercises, group activities, trainer-led discussions, and role-playing, along with homework involving readings, reflections, and skills practice. Attendance at all webinars was mandatory, and participants were evaluated on their performance, with outcomes ranging from “Incomplete” to “Level 1” or “Level 1R.” Level 1 participants are qualified to provide informal peer support in supervised settings, while Level 1R participants are recommended for an internship or practicum to complete 50 hours of monitored support, a step toward earning the PeerWorks Certified Peer Supporter certification.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Training

Before the end of the fiscal year, we hosted a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) training session in partnership with Brooke Chambers. The training covered a range of important topics, including Mental Health and Racism, Having Hard Conversations, Understanding Unconscious Bias, Self-Acceptance and Confidence Building, Diversity of Thought, and Exploring the Question “Do I Belong Here?” These sessions were designed to foster an inclusive and supportive environment by encouraging open dialogue, self-reflection, and awareness of the barriers that can affect individuals' sense of belonging and well-being. Through this partnership, we aimed to build a stronger, more equitable community where all individuals feel valued and supported.

Medical Assistance in Dying Discussion Series and Resources

In partnership with Peer Support Canada and with support from staff affiliated with the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health MAiD Working Group, we have developed a comprehensive resource document for peer supporters who are currently or may in the future, be supporting individuals pursuing Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD).

Additionally, we have created a 3-part facilitated discussion series, which will take place in April 2024. This series aims to provide peer supporters with the tools and knowledge to navigate these sensitive conversations with compassion and understanding.

Advocacy Efforts

Queen's Park Education Day

On May 8, 2023, PeerWorks and its member organizations visited Queen's Park to showcase the value of community-based Peer Support Organizations. The team met with Members of Provincial Parliament to highlight PeerWorks' role as the provincial voice for the unique work of our member CSIs and PSOs. We educated our government partners on the critical need for funding and partnerships with clinical and community providers, to support the Province's vision to enhance Ontario's healthcare framework. The visit included a lunch reception where the Honourable Michael Tibollo, Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, and MPPs Lisa Gretzky and Jamie West underscored the necessity for increased funding for peer support.

Pre-Budget Submission 2023/2024

In a letter addressed to the Ontario Minister of Finance, Hon. Peter Bethelenfalvy, PeerWorks outlined critical requests concerning the funding and support of Consumer Survivor Initiatives (CSIs) and Peer Support Organizations (PSOs). Similar to our submission from the previous year, we raised the urgent need for an immediate increase in PeerWorks' Transfer Payment Agreement (TPA) from the Mental Health & Addiction Centre of Excellence. We also emphasized the necessity of standardizing and centralizing the funding model for CSIs and PSOs.

Meeting with/Presenting to Government Officials

We recently presented to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs for the Pre-Budget Consultations, highlighting key issues and recommendations. In addition, we continue to engage with MPPs, Ministers, and their staff to advocate for our priorities. A recent meeting with Ontario Health focused on the data and digital initiatives, specifically in relation to CSIs and PSOs, discussing the types of data they collect.

"Power of Peer Support" video

We created an impactful "Power of Peer Support" video that features testimonials from various member organizations, highlighting the profound effect of peer support on individuals and communities. Through these personal stories, we showcase how peer support programs foster connection, empowerment, and resilience. We played the video during the Queen's Park Education Day.

Position Statement

After 18 months of surveys, focus groups, and advisory committee meetings, the Board approved "Drift from Peer Support Values and Standards: A Position Statement and Call for Action." We are excited to present it at the 2024 Annual Conference.

Committee Involvement

PeerWorks continues to influence tables and committees at the provincial-level, while highlighting the importance of Peer Support and lived experience within Ontario's healthcare system. Our participation includes membership in the Correction Reformation Coalition, Provincial Human Service Justice Coordinating Committee, and EE Net Advisory Committee

Fourth Annual Peer Support Strong Conference: Peer Support Revolution

On February 6th, 2024, PeerWorks and the Lived Experience & Recovery Network (LERN) co-hosted the fourth annual Peer Support Strong Conference. This year, the virtual conference focused on the revolution of peer support across Ontario's university campuses and workplaces. With institutions such as the University of Toronto, McMaster University, Western University, Nipissing University, Laurentian University, and Toronto Metropolitan University leading the charge, the event highlighted the increasing recognition of peer support as an essential component of health and wellness services.

The day began with a panel discussion titled "Peer Support in University Settings," featuring representatives from the University of Toronto, Nipissing University, and Laurentian University. Attendees gained insights into each university's peer support programs, followed by an engaging Q&A session that encouraged open dialogue about the unique challenges and successes of implementing these initiatives.

In the afternoon, Nicole Boileau led a thought-provoking presentation titled "Empowering Peer Leadership: Charting Paths Forward." Drawing on over 20 years of experience as a front-line worker and advocate for peer inclusion, Nicole posed critical questions about the future of community support work. She emphasized the importance of ensuring that community voices shape the direction of peer support, particularly within systems often dominated by hierarchical structures.

Following this, Calvin Prowse presented "Introducing Peer Support Futures: On Hopes, Dreams, and Building Utopia." Their research, based on their MA thesis, encouraged participants to envision a future where peer support thrives through the lens of utopia and dreaming. Calvin's insights prompted attendees to reflect on the transformative potential of peer support in the mental health sector.

We concluded with an inspiring session on the PeerConnectTO pilot program, presented by Elizabeth Tremblay and Sean Leuck. This innovative initiative focuses on tenant peer support within supportive housing, showcasing the importance of tenant co-design in creating effective support systems. The presenters stressed that peer-led recovery initiatives can foster community and workplace culture while highlighting resident equity and inclusion.

2023 Annual Conference

On May 9-10, 2023, the annual PeerWorks Annual Conference themed "Gathering Together, Dreaming Together, Transforming Together" brought together a diverse group of attendees to explore the power of peer support and collaborative change across Ontario. The event featured networking sessions, presentations on innovative research and programs, and an organizational mapping project aimed at enhancing community connections.

The conference kicked off with a compelling presentation by Carl Cruise-Baxter and Alex Andras on "Underhoused & Underrepresented: Helping Gender Diverse Peers Thrive." They addressed the pressing issue of accessibility in gender-affirming care and highlighted the work of the Trans Peer Outreach team. Next, Calvin Prowse presented "Work as Recovery: Warning Signs of Dystopian Futures?" In this thought-provoking session, Calvin examined the discourse surrounding "work as recovery" and its implications for Peer Support.

On the second day, the Supporting Peer Work (SPW) team led an interactive workshop on their project findings and the working conditions of peers in low-barrier social service agencies during the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Maxine Gareau and Arif Majeed then showcased the Innovative Peer Program developed by the Canadian Mental Health Association in North Bay.

Networking sessions provided attendees with opportunities to connect and share ideas. The "Dreaming Together" session led by Calvin Prowse and Colene Allen encouraged participants to envision future pathways for professional advancement within the peer support sector. Meanwhile, the "Gathering Together" session hosted by Allyson Theodorou and Andrea Schaefer facilitated meaningful connections across the province, while Mar Mohammed's "Transforming Together" session focused on building the systems and societies we aspire to create.

14th Annual Lighthouse Awards

The Lighthouse Awards ceremony took place on the first day of the Annual Conference, featuring a keynote address by Asante Haughton, a dedicated mental health advocate. Asante underscored the importance of amplifying the voices of individuals with lived experience to illuminate systemic gaps and foster collaboration between community members and policymakers. The following are the award winners:

Pay it Forward- Seth Compton

Peer of the Year- Raquel Rotchford

Lighthouse Award-Narine Dat Sookram

Annual General Meeting

Our Annual General Meeting was held on November 7, 2023. We were honoured to have Noah Irvine as the keynote speaker at our AGM. Noah's life story is one of remarkable resilience, having overcome the loss of both parents—his mother to suicide at age five and his father to an overdose at 15—along with the ongoing challenges of a learning disability and PTSD. Despite these hardships, Noah has emerged as a powerful advocate for mental health and addiction services, urging policymakers across Canada to "Step Up and Do Better" in addressing the crisis.

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