

**The Importance of Lived Experience Leadership
within the Housing Sector and How to Provide
Leadership to People with Lived Experience
(PWLE)**

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Understanding the vulnerability of PWLE and our own personal biases



- I am going to share my own personal story, during this time I want you to consciously try to think about the unintentional and intentional biases you are forming as I am speaking.
- Now, as we go through this presentation, think about the vulnerability I may have experienced sharing all of this to a room of strangers. The intention of this Tool-kit is to implement strategies to create a safer, more inclusive and equitable space for PWLE.

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“Nothing about us without us”

What is a Lived Experienced Recruitment and Retention Tool Kit and What is the Purpose ?

- Being a frontline worker who got into this line of work based solely on my own lived experience and the passion for working with folks on similar journeys, I saw an increased need to incorporate a peer led Toolkit that organization's can draw from when going through the process of onboarding/ retaining and engaging with PWLE.
- The purpose of this toolkit is to create awareness, safety, proper protocols and sustainability around not only hiring PWLE; but learning how to retain and support folks so PWLE are successful within your organization to move into leadership roles.
- Disclaimer- This is just a starter tool that can be developed and transformed as your organization sees fit



How do we define a person with Lived Experience?

- When defining we take into account that there are many circumstances which will lead to a person having lived experience.
- When we consider the human service sector and the purpose of perhaps adding into our job descriptions (Lived experience considered an asset) we then narrow down the type of lived experience we may be seeking or looking for based on the role and population we are serving.
- For example when working in the Housing Sector and with vulnerable populations experiencing homelessness, substance use, mental health, domestic violence, inter-generational trauma, sex work ect.. That's when having an employee who can engage and relate would be of benefit to the folks we serve.

Assessing your readiness to engage with PWLE and the Importance of having PWLE in the housing sector

- Hiring PWLE within the housing and non-profit sector has been recognized as beneficial to better serve the vulnerable populations.
- PWLE bring expertise and trauma wisdom to the folks we serve. Building rapport with understanding, compassion and empathy with the ability to connect on a more personal level.
- When dealing with the housing sector specifically and discussing how we can approach the housing crisis, having PWLE who can speak to their own experiences around houselnessness will bring an advantage. Using real life experiences on what does and does not work and can bring forth suggestions on how to effectively implement policies and procedures.
- In order to properly assess your readiness you must ask yourself these questions... Do you have appropriate supports in place? Are you ready to explore and expand your recruitment and employee retention policies? Are you ready to accept that PWLE belong on boards, belong in decision making meetings, belong in developing policy and procedure and adopt the ideology around “nothing about us without us”.
- Are you willing to be open to create safety for PWLE recognizing the experience we bring will also bring the possibility of criminal records and a history where you will need to have a clear and concise process when engaging in the onboarding process?

Recruitment and Retention of PWLE (Stigmas, Authority Trauma, Inclusion & Equity)

Recruitment

- Job Posting / Job Description
 - The recruitment of PWLE after assessing your readiness starts with your Job Posting / Description. When developing your intention to highlight lived experience as an asset, you can start by having this outlined in the Job Description under experience and education. You must be willing to consider Lived Expertise equivalent to education and a part of experience within the field.
 - Asking for folks to submit a cover letter gives a safe space for PWLE to apply and submit a cover letter outlining what their experience is outside of societal norms and how it aligns with the job description/ organization. Most times this is where that lived experience will be disclosed.
 - When listing the requirements for the role, we recognize that asking for a criminal record check and child intervention check is common practice. Now when opening your request for PWLE what I personally have found beneficial is stating the request to provide the CRC and CIC and providing a description stating the results will be reviewed on a case by case basis during the interview process. This opens up the possibility that there is room for discussion around having a past at the employers discretion. It is not easy having people judge you based on a piece of paper that gives no context to the circumstances of the results. These are stigmas that PWLE are faced with in the work force.
- Resume Review
 - When reviewing resumes and seeking PWLE to join your organization there needs to be mindfulness around using a different lens and having understanding around non-traditional resume reviewing, it may be beneficial having someone with LE sitting on the hiring panel to assist in selection and review.
 - Recognizing that folks with LE may have gaps in employment and educational achievements may differ.

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- Interview Process
 - With a goal of successfully onboarding PWLE having PWLE on the hiring panel brings the expertise of building your interview questions, answering any questions that may come up as well as being able to divulge the expectations of the role and possible triggers that may arise.
 - Being a PWLE who first entered the field of harm reduction housing I was lucky to have a mentor who was able to walk me through the expectations around working in this field in my interview. This gave me an idea of what I was applying for and provided me a safe space to expect triggers that did arise, just as I was informed they would.
 - Generally at the end of the interview where you state the requirements of the role such as CRC and CIC this is where you can open the opportunity to ask if there is anything the applicant would like to share in regards to the results and creating safety by asking what the circumstances were at the time and where they are at currently in their own personal journey.
 - There are still stigma's around PWLE and criminal records. The process of disclosing criminal records if not done with a safe and clear process can become triggering and potentially cause more harm to the potential employee. I have been denied a position based on submitting my criminal record without an opportunity to share the circumstances and it did not feel good, especially when you know your potential. If have your own personal bias around this and you are a part of the hiring, this needs to be unpacked.
 - The more opportunities that you provide to PWLE to discuss their results of the CRC or CIC and the more detail you put into the recruitment process to ensure there is clear communication in regards to what this process looks like, the easier it will be on folks applying. After I had that one experience, I hyper focused on the wording in the job postings concerned it would happen again.

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Retention- We have now successfully on boarded PWLE – now the most important part, retaining and engaging with PWLE to be supported within your organization to grow.

- Supervision/ Mentorship

- Being a LE Leader myself I have greatly benefited from having a supervisor who also had LE. In my supervisions, we would discuss the general performance discussions; but we also dived into a portion of the supervision where we were able to debrief and discuss how working in this line of work impacted myself on a personal level. They created a safe space and asked questions around how I felt about having my Drug of Choice (DOC) openly visible while at work and created a space where I was able to talk out my emotional and physical responses. In a matter of three months working around PWUD (People Who Use Drugs) it felt like second nature and I was able to mentor and train new staff around what I experienced and offer suggestions.
- When completing supervisions it would be beneficial to have a LE employee be involved in the process. There are many options such as having PWLE structuring and reviewing the supervision documents or having PWLE being a part of the supervisions meaning a TL or another manager.
- Supervisions can be intimidating, when you place an employee in a leadership role it is very important that they have an understanding of the power dynamics and that many folks with LE have trauma with authority figures. Creating safety while providing progressive constructive feedback is key in supervisions. I have never personally been fired but for some irrational reason, I constantly would think I'm getting fired. During your supervisions it is important to understand and build rapport with the employee. This will give you the opportunity to understand any triggers and preferred forms of communications. I disclosed to a previous supervisor that getting called into the office was triggering for me and it felt like I was in trouble (spending most of my adulthood in prison can do this), my boss would take the time to text or tell me I wasn't getting fired and we made it a joke at times.
- Taking the time to understand trauma responses and how to navigate it as a leader is one of the most important ways to build the working relationship with PWLE. Truly adopting a trauma informed approach starts with our employees.

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- Lets chat about transparency! If you have a specific area for growth, it is your responsibility as a leader to address it, provide solutions around growth and work with the employee around improvements. This ties into that authority trauma and a mis-trust for the systems, if you unintentionally or intentionally do anything that is backhanded or not direct, you can possibly break that trust in your working relationship, for PWLE trust is extremely important. Obviously there are things in this line of work that are out of our control, this refers to the things that are in our control.
- What is Authority Trauma? Speaking from my own personal experiences- I have been mis-treated by many different authoritative figures, such as prison guards, police, social services, group home workers, social workers and folks in leadership. This has created a mis-trust of people in authoritative roles where my trauma response is becoming guarded and needing time to build a rapport- especially with those who are unaware of the power imbalance of their roles.
- Please educate your staff about POWER DYNAMICS. Understanding that being a support worker, a social worker or any professional role is a power imbalance to the folks we serve. Recognizing that we unintentionally carry power over basic needs.
- Personally as a LE Leader I have engaged in many different forms of Supervisions. My personal favorite, adopting an indigenous lens is working from a medicine wheel approach. This addresses the four key areas for employees; Mental, Emotional, Physical and Spiritual while still reviewing the expectations of the job responsibilities with self-reflection. Please stop having employees fill out an evaluation on their own, it is our responsibility as leaders to guide the employee in supervisions, again discussing expectations and reflections from both sides.
- Focus on self-care! Staff burn-out and compassion fatigue are REAL. We all know this! The medicine Wheel approach is a great way to discuss and develop self-care in supervisions. I generally aim to set self-care goals for both the employee and myself, this allows space to do a follow-up as well as role-model doing self-care as a leader.
- Supervisions have the potential to be progressive and are intended to be an opportunity to develop and grow your staff.

Recruitment and Retention of PWLE (Stigmas, Authority Trauma, Inclusion & Equity)

- Professional Development

- Training! So many times in this field and in my own personal experiences I have started a role and received little to no training. Sure, we know this is a demanding sector and we almost consider being thrown into the deep end and having employees sink or swim has become a way of testing employees to see if they have what it takes to make it.
- **(A raise of hands if you have ever started a new job where you were thrown into the deep end with no life jacket)** We need to **STOP** doing this! We need to **invest** in our employees, because we are then **investing in our organization and our folks we serve**. Tighten your professional development, not just at the time of onboarding but long-term. As an organization it is our responsibility to invest in our employees, if we have expectations of effective performance as we should, then we should be taking the time to provide the proper training and workshops to invest in our employees.
- Ask questions, talk about learning styles, both from yourself and what the employees preferences are in regards to training (are they hands on, do they like to read everything, ect..)
- Talk about personal triggers, what supports are needed and normalize the fact that staff get triggered especially in this line of work.
- DEBRIEF! Having an open door policy where I feel safe to approach my supervisor and providing the same for the staff I over see is one of the most desirable leadership qualities, especially for PWLE.
- Team Building! Have Fun! Staff burnout is real in this sector- get creative and ask your employees what their idea of fun looks like!

Recruitment and Retention of PWLE (Stigmas, Authority Trauma, Inclusion & Equity)



- Compensation

- This is a huge topic on equity and inclusion of PWLE as there have been some differing opinions in regards to compensation within the sector.
- When I started in this line of work I was hired based on my lived expertise around homelessness and the experiences that come with it. I did not have a diploma in the field, so understandably so I started at the starting wage. After one year I was asked to fill in for a lead position, my mentor at the time was training me to complete the leadership tasks such as budgeting and payroll. I attempted to apply but I wasn't even considered due to not meeting the educational requirements of the role. When they hired for the role, I was asked to do the training and onboarding for this person, which is was no problem. This person met all the criteria in regards to having a degree and after a few months, I was still doing the budgeting and payroll for this person. I was still getting paid starting wage, this person was making 10\$ more then me. Fast forward another year where I moved into a manager role, although I received a minor increase, I was still familiar with what staff were making as I did their payroll. My TL made 6 \$ more then me because she had a degree and I did not.
- There are numerous concerns around this concept and it created unnecessary conflict between colleagues. We were all advised by leadership that we were not allowed to disclose to other employees how much we were making... talk about uncomfortable.. We talked about it ... naturally..

Recruitment and Retention of PWLE (Stigmas, Authority Trauma, Inclusion & Equity)

- A concept that I absolutely loved was being able to see the wage grids on the job postings! There was a clear understanding around what that compensation looked like prior to even applying. When signing my offer letter it was highlighted what my wage would be when starting, after probation and after one year. Now I feel this should still be based on performance as well. This approach is equitable and inclusive of all experience and education that employees bring and no one had to hide what they were making minimizing personal feelings towards other colleagues. You are then not saying that a degree means more than LE or vice versa. Now I personally feel that compensation should continue to be reviewed on a yearly basis and based on performance.
- Compensation does not just mean \$\$\$ in the bank. Compensation also includes the perks that employees receive from the organization. Having worked recently at an organization that pays very well but does not provide benefits, paid staff training or team building/staff events... I felt the compensation did not meet my personal needs. I was missing self-care such as massage, therapy costs, eye care and dental work for my children.
- Tokenism- if your organization is benefiting off of a PWLE such as having them share their personal story- there should always be an honorarium offered and an agreed compensation. Also if we cannot be inclusive and equitable with PWLE this is also tokenism.

How to Foster Lived Experienced Leadership

- We have discussed how to onboard and retain folks with LE and in that discussion we highlighted many circumstances where having PWLE included in processes such as hiring panels and onboarding. This is a great lead into how we can start to foster those leadership roles. Pushing past consultations and diving into having LE at the forefront of the Housing Sector.
- Growing and investing in PWLE and supporting that growth into leadership fosters not only the employee but your organizations end goal to end houselessness. How do we do this? Something that I had started at a previous position was a Lived Experience Community of Practice (COP). The intention was to create a peer led space of safety for PWLE. We had many goals that included; Onboarding peer support, peer support in general, bringing forth suggestions to HR and becoming a part of the onboarding advisory panel and eventually become an advisory panel for the organization meaning having a seat at the table when discussing the outcomes and goals of the organization highlighting “Nothing about us, Without us”. My suggestion is this can be transformed into what works well for your organization, but when done by PWLE with the support of upper leadership, you can foster PWLE taking a lead in transforming policy.
- Leadership is more than just Management or Team Lead positions
- When I was working as a Site Manager I ended up doing my own onboarding around harm reduction utilizing my own expertise around substance use. I would train new hires or staff around paraphernalia, what each item was for and explaining the effects each substance can have and signs of overdose. Using personal stories and experiences to humanize substance use and the folks we served.
- This is a prime example of having PWLE applying their expertise to train, mentor and lead within your organization.

How to Implement this tool within your Organization

- This tool needs to remain peer led by folks with LE. Taking steps such as allowing the resources and space to build a Community of Practice leading
- Having PWLE engage in Onboarding, Policy Reform, on the Board of Directors, Growing into Leadership/Mentorship roles
- Providing intentional and meaningful engagement with PWLE understanding how to recruit and retain within your organization
- This is an ever evolving tool-kit
- Truly adopting “ Nothing about us without us”



Questions ? & Comments