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“ I want to learn about the JHS Peer Mentor program ”

In partnership with Provincial Correctional Health Services (PHSA) and their Community Transition Team (CTT), the Peer Mentor program supports people on opioid agnostic therapy (OAT) as they transition from the correctional center setting into the community. Through positive role modelling and a shared understanding of lived experience, Peer Mentors help instill a greater sense of hope and connection for individuals in recovery. Our Peer Mentors work closely with people following their release and support mentees in navigating the substance use and health system, identifying personal goals and community resources, including accompanying them to appointments. Our Peer Mentors currently support people transitioning from Surrey Pretrial Services Centre and North Fraser Pretrial.

*To learn more about the Peer Mentor program, we spoke with **Teddy Chan**, our Senior Manager of New Initiatives who oversees the program, where he elaborated on its significance.*

How did the Peer Mentor program come to be?

I believe systemically there is a recognition in the limitations of how we have been approaching and supporting people who are on OAT and transitioning into the community from prison.

A key element to this initiative is that Peers are approaching their work by focusing on the relationship with a participant. A participant might not have a lot of trust in the system, or the system might have failed them previously.

One of the outcomes is seeing people flourish when given the opportunity to learn and grow, and to contribute in the most sincere way.

How are Peer Mentors chosen?

Like all organizational members, we seek Peer candidates who are grounded and aligned with the organization's values. We are not looking for anybody with specific lived experiences... rather we're looking for someone who is open-minded, and driven to support people through a person centred lens.

Peer candidates generally have the skillset to connect with a broad range of people. Overall, our evaluation and decision to hire are based on a person's belief to the values of the organization.

What do you think is the value of having the Peer Mentor program established across the Lower Mainland?

I personally believe there is a level of systems-un-doing that we are exploring. We are taught in a way to support people but rarely do the teachings come from people who have live those experiences.

I don't think there are many training opportunities out there that can really focus on workers being fully un-biased and listening and feeling to what people are experiencing and needing.

The Peer's role is to help re-bridge these barriers through their ability to relate and understand the potential challenges and paths to successes ahead. In Peers there is a more genuine approach to empathy, with a level of interconnectivity that someone who has not lived that experience can fully share.

The supports now involve someone who has actually been through it and helps close the systems gap by strengthening relationships, in hopes that relational connectivity is an effective way to mitigate the risk for people who are transitioning from prisons.



What is something about the Peer Mentor program that you want to share that staff might otherwise not be aware of?

These are people who have similar career aspirations as many people in the organization do. They have a very aligned approach to wanting to help people in an impactful way. They are proud of their role, and their association to the organization.

Peers enter this position because they actually want to work in and contribute to the social services. They don't enter into this position just because they have lived experience.

I think by hiring peers to connect to certain parts of our service delivery bridges that gap between a clinical understanding, or misunderstanding, of what people are going through.

Many people with lived experiences have natural perspectives that not all workers may fully understand. And because we don't fully understand this, there is always a possibility for an unidentified tension, or distrust, when we work with people. Conversely, somebody who's walked in those shoes might be able to close that distrust in a more effective way.

The Peer Mentor program also offers an opportunity for the organization to provide people with fully respected, equitable opportunity to be employed. This is something we should be excited about. ■

If there's one thing
I think (people)
should know, is that
(Peer Mentors)
enter into this position
because **they actually want
to do support service.**
They don't enter into this
position just because they
have **lived experience.**

