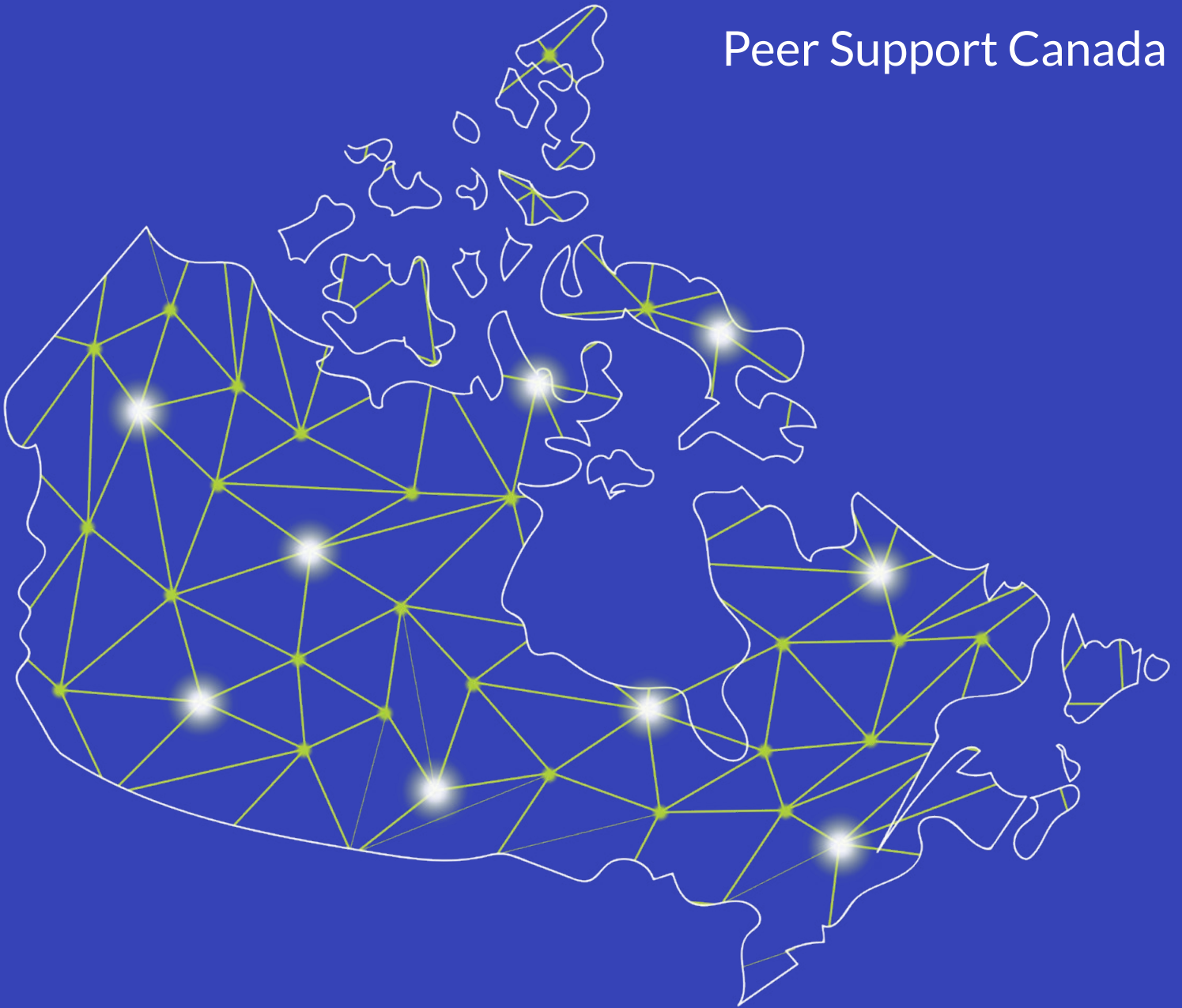




Peer Support Canada



Guiding Connection

Strategic Plan 2022 – 2027



Visual Overview

Description of the Visual

The North Star metaphor emerged from one of our consultations. One leader from a peer support organization who participated in a focus group suggested that rather than a rocket, Peer Support Canada should serve as the North Star in the peer support field, lighting the way, without being too directive. This image illustrates our vision for Peer Support Canada.

The North Star, or Polaris, is in a fixed and steady position, and its significance is due in part by the way the northern stars trace the sky around it. In

essence, we are as strong and significant as the stars around us – the wide-ranging, diverse peer support organizations and programs across Canada. Just as Polaris does not control the other stars, Peer Support Canada is not here to dictate. However, as a national organization, we are positioned at the centre to connect and orient the stars. We are here to be of service to others in the field, to draw connections, so that we can work alongside each other and be stronger together.

This strategic plan will serve to establish Peer Support Canada as both a national leader and convenor in the peer support field in Canada.

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A Message from Allison Dunning, Our National Manager

During the strategic planning process, I had the pleasure of hearing insights from individuals; peer support workers, peer support volunteers, those working in fundraising, executives of organizations offering peer support services, and clinicians. I spoke with people with over 30 years in the field, and I spoke with people who have only just joined. The consistent care and sense of hope for the future of Peer Support Canada has been immensely motivating.

The hope I heard and felt is contagious. I also feel a sense of responsibility for ensuring that peer-led, national leadership is available to the peer support community. My hope for the future also comes from the changing social context: the reduction of stigma, the growing recognition that mental health and substance use health challenges affect all individuals living in Canada, and the power of a society that believes change is possible.



Of course, there is much more work to do. As a peer support volunteer, coordinator, and program manager, I have witnessed the successes and the challenges facing the peer support community. Through my work, and through the strategic planning process, a clear need has emerged for a national organization that can communicate the value of peer support and provide peer-led guidance to ensure fidelity of the profession, philosophy, and movement. We need to make sure that policy decisions are always informed by the experiences of people with lived and living experiences of mental health and substance use health challenges, and that peer support service provision rests in the hands of people with those experiences. I recognize and have tremendous gratitude for the trailblazers who have disrupted the narrative that a one-size-fits-all approach to mental health care is the way to go. I look forward to continuing to undo that narrative alongside the peer support community.

We deeply appreciate the individuals and organizations that took the time to participate in our interviews, focus groups, surveys, and visioning sessions. Peer Support Canada would not have the sense of purpose and direction that we have outlined in this document if it weren't for all your contributions. On behalf of Peer Support Canada, I would also like to express a sincere thank you to the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), National. CMHA's support has helped us to get to this point and has allowed Peer Support Canada the time it needs to set our course.

I am humbled and honoured to bring my lived and living experiences of mental health challenges to this important work, and I look forward to working alongside the community towards ensuring the well-being of those who live in Canada.

About Peer Support Canada

Throughout its existence, Peer Support Canada, and the community surrounding it, have shared a resounding sense of hope, and the belief in the transformative power of peer support.

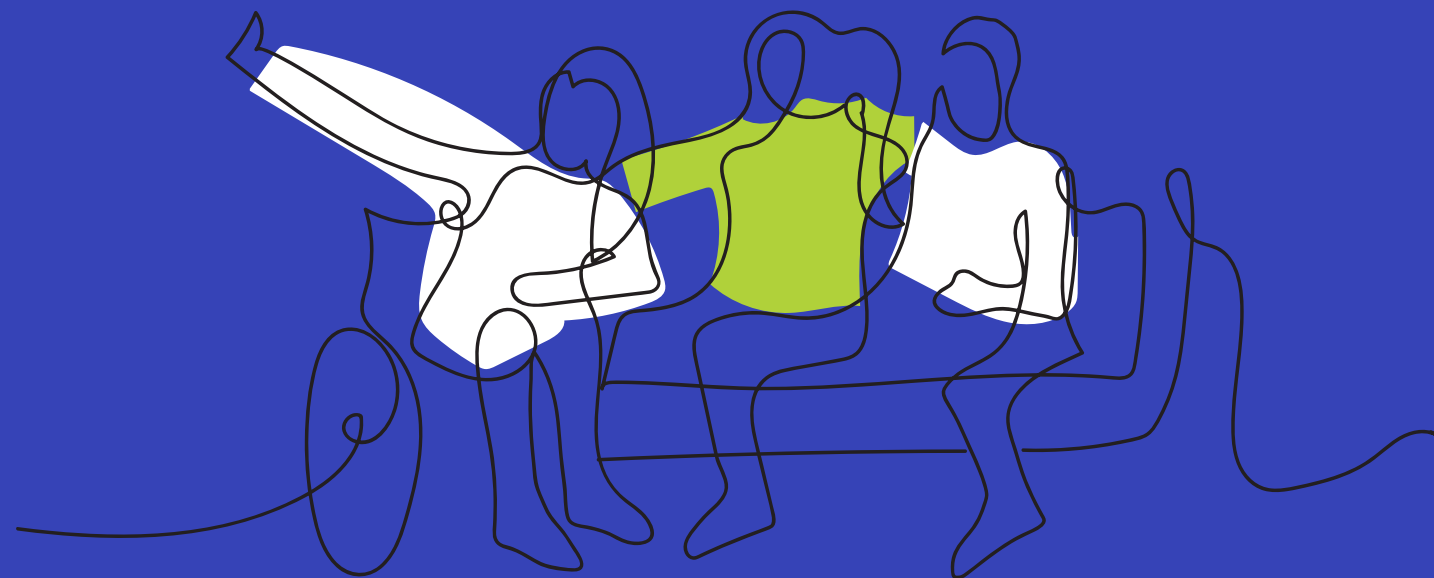
The history of Peer Support Canada has not been linear. Peer Support Canada was born in 2010 out of a pilot project with the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC), whose goal was to fully integrate peer support within Canada's mental health system, as a service complementing clinical models of care. By consulting with individuals, peer support workers and agencies across Canada, Peer Support Accreditation and Certification Canada (PSACC), as it was known at that time, established a framework involving standards of practice,

core values and principles to guide peer support workers. This framework continues to guide the organization. Since its inception, the organization's goals also included creating and communicating

the requirements for implementing and managing peer support services and creating a strategy to evaluate the effectiveness of peer support.

In 2012, PSACC became a legal and independent organization working to provide leadership and direction for the peer support community across Canada.

In 2017, PSACC joined forces with CMHA National as one of its programs and formally became Peer Support Canada (PSC). The merger proved to be beneficial but also raised new challenges. CMHA National supported PSC in being able to continue delivering its services.



Working together also supported PSC's national reach and complemented CMHA branches' work in peer support service delivery. It was difficult, however, for PSC to maintain its status as a program of CMHA National when we felt the growing needs of the peer support community necessitated the return of a national organization entirely dedicated to its cause. Moreover, in keeping with our peer support values, we aspired to have lived-experience leadership. In 2021, CMHA National and PSC entered into a series of discussions about our relationship and decided together to redraw our partnership. CMHA National continues to provide a home for PSC until we can establish ourselves as an independent organization. We continue to collaborate with CMHA National and have found new ways of working together to support peer supporters across the country.

As for where we are now as an organization, we will be leaning into our strengths that include our internal knowledge, experience and expertise in the peer support field, our team of long-standing dedicated volunteers, our lived and living experience leadership and our strong relationships within the peer support community across Canada. We will be striving towards re-developing and expanding our current operational infrastructure so we can go beyond certification and into other areas of service delivery. We will prioritize the re-acquisition of our own independent charitable registration status so we can increase access to funding opportunities and resources. We ultimately recognize the need for and will strive towards becoming a stronger, more consistent leader to convene, guide and represent the peer support community in Canada.

“Peer support is about empowering someone with similar experiences to our own to embrace their self-determination and recovery.”

– Focus Group Participant
(peer support worker)

Executive Summary



Our Vision

Peer support is an integrated and integral component of mental health and substance use health systems, accessible to all individuals, family members and supporters affected by mental health and substance use health challenges and mental illnesses.



Our Mission

Increase the recognition, growth, and accessibility of peer support within the mental health and substance use health spaces.




Our Values

Peer Support Canada operates in alignment with the core values of peer support:

- Hope and Recovery
- Empathetic and Equal Relationships
- Self-Determination
- Dignity, Respect and Social Inclusion
- Integrity, Authenticity and Trust
- Health and Wellness
- Lifelong Learning and Personal Growth

The Engagement Process

The stakeholder engagement process was facilitated by the leadership of Peer Support Canada with support from CMHA National and consultation from Suzanne Gibson, Suzanne Gibson & Associates, and Jason Newberry, Taylor Newberry Consulting.

Through this process we intended to develop a clear understanding of what the peer support community in Canada needs most from a national organization and to establish a strategic plan that best reflects those needs. The process included: 

Amplification of Traditionally Marginalized Voices

We seek to create a Peer Support Canada that serves all peer supporters and peer support programs/organizations across Canada. We acknowledge that Peer Support Canada needs to do more work to make our organization and services more inclusive to support a growing, diverse national peer support community. To achieve this goal, we made sure to collect disaggregated data from our respondents, and in our data report we highlighted the feedback coming from traditionally marginalized groups, based on identifiers including age, gender identity/expression, racialization, and identification as a First Nation, Métis, Inuit, or Indigenous person. We continue to put the perspectives, expertise, and lived/living experiences of traditionally marginalized populations at the centre of our work when engaging in program planning and organizational decision-making.

1 environmental scan

that assessed the peer support field in Canada and abroad and identified key opportunities in the Canadian mental health, substance use health, workplace, and other fields.

8 individual interviews

with selected peer supporters, community leaders and experts, peer support organizations, funders and key stakeholders who are dedicated to the work.

2 focus groups

one with peer support workers/volunteers and the other with peer support managers/leaders across Canada.

306 responses

to an online survey for peer support workers/volunteers and managers/leaders across Canada.

3 visioning sessions

that included our Peer Support Canada Advisory Committee, Certification Committee, Mentor group, and CMHA National leaders to analyze and assess the data collected in the engagement process and to set a clear vision for Peer Support Canada's mandate, along with clear priority areas of focus.



Defining Peer Support

Peer Support Canada recognizes that providing one definition of peer support may not be possible. Peer support is a form of service provision, a philosophy, and a movement. The origin of formalized peer support within mental health services is credited to the consumer/survivor movement, in which people who experienced mistreatment within the traditional healthcare system advocated for and became providers of improved mental health care. The consumer/survivor movement grew up alongside the civil rights movement, gay rights movement, the women's rights movement, and Indigenous rights movements. The success of each of these movements reinforced the success of the others. In addition, while Western society has formalized the approach and practices of peer support both inside and outside of our healthcare systems, many of the philosophies and practices existed within Indigenous communities long before the consumer/survivor movement.

Peer support involves emotional and practical support between two people who share a common experience. It is rooted in a practice that minimizes power imbalances and fosters equal and empathetic relationships, encouraging people who are coping with challenges to make decisions that are based on their own knowledge and expertise about their own needs, with the support of a peer. Peer support related to mental health and substance use health challenges can take place within community, clinical, education, and workplace settings and can take the form of formalized programs and services or informal human connections. There are

many other forms of peer support in community, hospitals, informal networks, and relationships, for individuals and their family members. These are based in shared experiences such as physical health challenges, disability, or ongoing experiences with marginalization, discrimination, or stigma, among other experiences. Peer Support Canada believes in the transformative power of all forms of peer support.

Throughout this strategic plan, peer support will be used to mean an approach to supporting those who are coping with "mental health and substance use health challenges." We recognize the importance of defining one's own wellness or recovery journey, and we recognize that individuals may or may not define their mental health and substance use health experiences as "challenges." We wholeheartedly believe that peer support should be available to anyone who would like to access it, at any point regardless of how they define their health experiences.

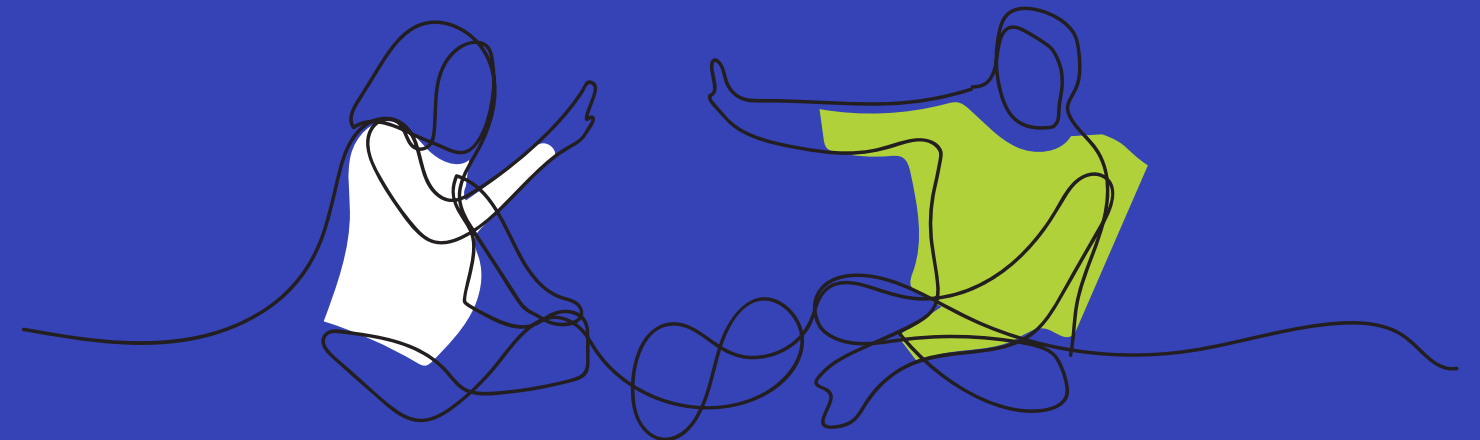
"Peer support is about meeting someone where they're at, validating their feelings and experiences, and drawing from personal experiences in a way that's helpful to the person seeking support. This can include coping strategies, resources, or listening."

– Focus Group Participant
(peer support worker)

Who Will We Serve?

Our intention is to support individuals and organizations who offer or would like to offer peer support services in Canada. Peer Support Canada's expertise in relation to peer support has, and will continue to be, within the mental health and substance use health space. We also recognize that our in-depth understanding of peer support as a modality of service

can be beneficial for a variety of contexts that lend themselves to supporting the wellbeing of those living in Canada. Given this, we will also collaborate with individuals and organizations with expertise in contexts other than or adjacent to mental health and substance use health to be able to support where there is alignment.



What We Heard

Context of Peer Support in Canada

Here are the key takeaways from our stakeholder consultations.

Peer Support is Receiving Increased Recognition

Historically, peer support has not been a significant part of Canada's mental health and substance use health care systems. In addition to drawing on pre-existing Indigenous ways of knowing and being, the peer support movement grew out of the grassroots, developed by people who sought alternatives to psychiatry and mainstream mental health services and treatment. In more recent years, peer support has garnered greater attention and support in the mental health and substance use health fields as an important complement to existing healthcare supports. While peer support continues to be underutilized and underfunded overall, there is new energy, interest and recognition of its importance. A growing body of evidence suggests that peer support is effective and useful for people coping with challenges. That said, we recognize that the quantity and quality of peer support service delivery is inconsistent across the country and that some provinces and territories are ahead of others in terms of integration and utilization of peer support services.

Need for Role Clarity

While there have been increases in recognition, integration and use of peer support services, there is also a growing need for increased understanding and commitment to the authentic peer support model, especially when integrated into multi-disciplinary teams. Based on our consultations, peer support workers, volunteers and leaders of organizations and programs consistently and resoundingly asked Peer Support Canada to offer education and consistent guidance about what peer support is, what it is not, and why it is a valid and necessary element of support for individuals striving for increased wellness.

We also clearly heard that, for peer support to work within the clinical system, it needs to maintain its integrity. A peer supporter's role is distinct from that of a clinician, and so we cannot measure the impact of peer support through a clinical lens. When peer support is integrated into a clinical setting, it is crucial that the peer supporter's role be understood and upheld. This requires education, policy, and diligent fidelity to standards of practice that are always viewed through the lens of lived and

"There's not enough funding to support our work – especially given the skyrocketing demands since the onset of the pandemic."

– Focus Group Participant
(peer support worker)

"There's a real lack of awareness of what peer support is and what peer supporters do, which makes it hard to make sure we're getting the support that we need to be able to do this work properly and effectively."

– Strategic Plan Survey
Respondent

"More people need to be made aware of how peer support can help fill the gaps."

– Strategic Plan Survey
Respondent

"Supervision for peer supporters that is done by clinicians can be a challenge when there's not enough education for supervisors about what peer support is and what it isn't."

– Strategic Plan Survey
Respondent

living experience. With all of this in mind, guidance is needed to define the peer support role and there is a need to empower organizations and individuals to make the distinctions themselves about what does and does not constitute peer support, within a set of guiding parameters.

Peer Support Can Bridge Gaps

It is clear to us that our current mental health and substance use health care systems are inadequate for supporting the needs of all people in Canada. Costly, inflexible, and regimented approaches to healthcare often pose restrictions and are not accessible enough when individuals of various social locations are experiencing different challenges in different parts of the country. Peer support, as a service that is flexible, adaptable and, by its very nature, tailored to the service user's needs, can help to fill the gaps in the Canadian healthcare system. Peer support can be offered as a stand-alone service or in conjunction with other approaches to service delivery. All healthcare providers (including peer supporters) operate within a specific scope of work in supporting a person's well-being and peer support is an effective way to address the limitations of services provided by various health care professionals.

Having peer supporters focussed on non-clinical, mutual support, empowerment of service-users and wholistic care rooted in the lived and living experience perspective helps to fill gaps that exist within other approaches. When peer supporters work alongside other healthcare providers, the needs of all people in Canada are closer to being met.

Need for Lived and Living Experience Leadership

Leadership and guidance in the field of peer support need to be rooted in the perspective of those with lived and living experience of mental health and substance use health challenges. This includes but is not limited to standards of practice, recommendations around service delivery, peer support training requirements and advocacy work. The success of the movement, philosophy and service have been rooted in the expertise of individuals with lived and living experience, where the centering of this perspective remains an essential tenet of peer support work. There is a risk of peer support leadership, decision-making, and services being changed, and even assimilated, by clinical practices. This puts peer support at risk of losing its power and effectiveness.

Given the complexity of human experiences, individual needs, and the mental health and substance use health care systems, peer support services need to be coordinated and offered in collaboration with other approaches to mental health and substance use health care. In fact, inviting peer support into multi-disciplinary teams offers the opportunity for clinicians/other staff and peer supporters to learn from each other. When peer supporters can share their lived and living experiences, peer support can shift the clinical paradigm, working both on an individual level with peers and on a systems level as a movement.

Need for Guidance, Not Directives

The peer support community needs leadership and consistent guidance, but it does not need policies and practices that are inflexible, regimented, created unilaterally, or imposed. Peer supporters and organizations across the country must be able to rely on Peer Support Canada to provide consistent guidelines and recommended standards of practice that allow for flexibility based on specific needs, contexts, and expertise. Organizations need to be

empowered to provide quality peer support services that are founded on knowledge and best practices.

Peer Support Workers and Organizations Need More Support

Given the growing evidence base for the benefits of peer support services, and the need for additional, more accessible, and culturally appropriate mental health and substance use health services, peer supporters and organizations offering peer support services require more resources and support. As a national organization, Peer Support Canada is well-positioned to connect peer supporters, peer support organizations and programs across Canada. Those working in the field are eager for connection and collaboration and no longer wish to work in isolation from one another or to re-invent the wheel. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been increased demands on our mental health and substance use health systems, and these will likely continue. Given the needs of our communities, it is essential that peer supporters and organizations have the resources and support they need to meet the needs of all people in Canada.

“There’s a need for connection to other peer supporters. There needs to be a space to (confidentially) debrief inside, and outside of the organizations that peer supporters are working for.”

– Strategic Plan Survey Respondent

“There can often be some undefined expectations for peer support workers, and having more clarity about standards and guidelines would go a long way for us.”

– Strategic Plan Survey Respondent

“We need to make sure that our service users are able to access linguistically and culturally competent peer support services.”

– Strategic Plan Survey Respondent

“We need peer support services to honour the fact that recovery can be an up and down process.”

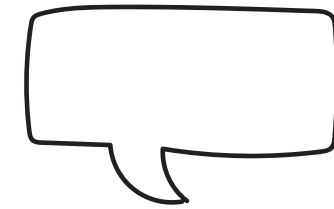
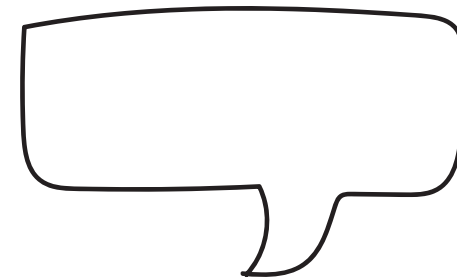
– Focus Group Participant (peer support worker)

Intentional and Meaningful Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Peer Support Canada has not adequately drawn on the expertise of Canada’s diverse communities. We recognize that Canada is extremely diverse and, given that peer support is rooted in mutual support through shared experiences, we need to ensure individuals of all social locations are providing peer support services. We also recognize that those from traditionally marginalized communities are disproportionately impacted by mental health and substance use health related challenges due to systemic oppression. Therefore, we need to ensure that individuals within these communities can receive support from their peers.

It Comes Down to Service Recipients

While Peer Support Canada will be working to support peer supporters and peer support organizations in Canada, we will do so while keeping in mind that the service users, or participants, are the ones impacted by what we do. Our efforts will focus on ensuring that those interested in receiving peer support services are able to do so, and that those services align with best practices and peer support values.



North Star Outcomes

1

Increase the validity of peer support in Canada

Peer Support Canada will offer services that provide education, consistent standards, guidelines, and advocacy about what peer support is, what it is not, and why it is a valid and necessary element of support for people who are experiencing mental health and substance use health challenges. These services will increase the consistency and quality of peer support service delivery across the country, while allowing for authenticity and flexibility, thereby increasing the validity of peer support.

3

Ensure our sustainability as an organization

To accomplish the above-mentioned outcomes, Peer Support Canada must focus on building its foundation and organizational capacity. Careful organizational development will create a sustainable organization with steady and reliable access to resources, effective governance and collaborative leadership with consistent contact and consultation with the peer support community.

2

Support peer supporters and organizations to do their work

Peer Support Canada will offer services that support peer supporters and peer support organizations to deliver their services. These services will help decrease burnout amongst peer supporters, increase their skills and capacity, offer opportunities for national connection and collaboration within the peer support community and will ensure an ongoing commitment to the best practices and values of peer support.

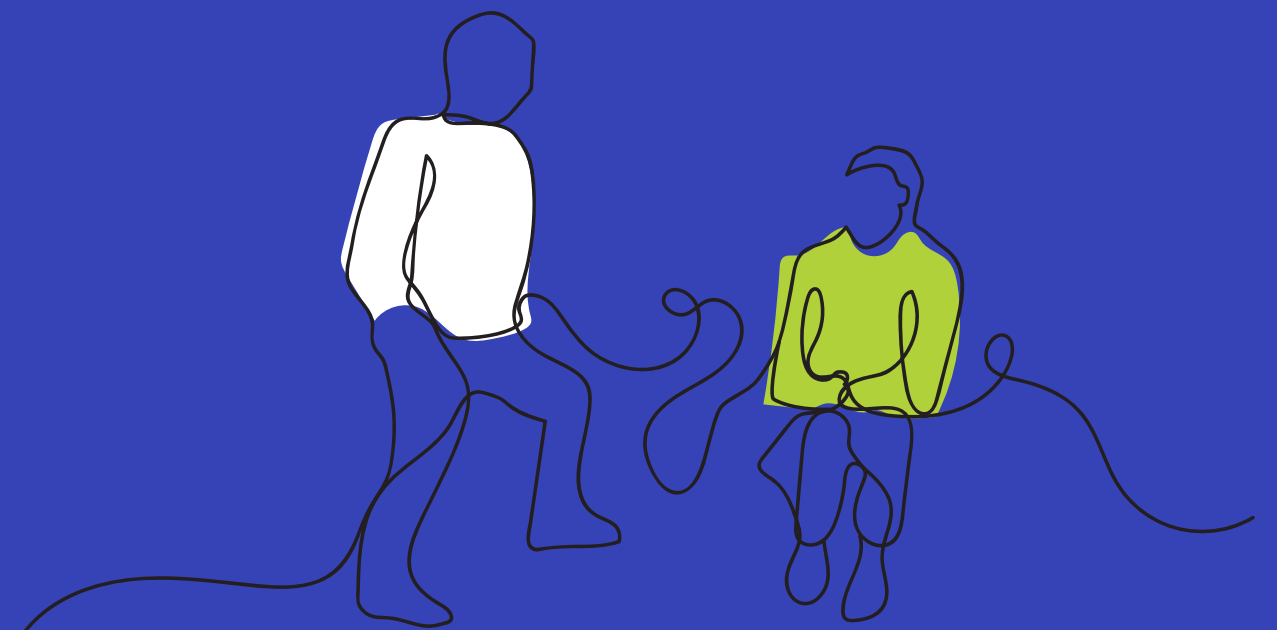
“We need a national organization to help make sure there’s some level of consistency and recognition of the value of peer support, and to make sure that people who would benefit from peer support services can access them.”

– Strategic Plan Survey Respondent

Strategic Goals & Priorities

Through the strategic planning process, Peer Support Canada identified five priority areas that will help us to achieve the outcomes outlined above. To sustain the organization, it is important to recognize that while the following five priority areas make up the long-term goals of the organization, the introduction and development of each of

these services will be taken on in a strategic manner, with sustainability in mind. Decisions about which activities to pursue will consider the changing needs of the peer support community, the resources available, partnership opportunities and diversity, equity, and inclusion, and will be shared publicly.





Priority Area 1:

Consultation, Training and Professional Development

Goal:

To support the delivery of effective peer support services that are aligned with the values and standards of practice.

- Peer Support Canada will offer professional development opportunities for peer supporters across the country including mentorship and a national community of practice.

Priorities:

- Peer Support Canada will offer consultation to peer support organizations and organizations that are looking to offer peer support services. These consultation services will be offered to create or build upon the strengths of an existing peer support program and will be grounded in the values of peer support and standards of practice.
- Peer Support Canada will offer specialized trainings for peer supporters and organizations (e.g., trauma-informed peer support, working with peer supporters on multidisciplinary teams, supervisory role training, etc.) for peer support workers, volunteers, colleagues, and managers to support high-quality service delivery across the country.¹

Outcomes:

- Organizations looking to offer, or already offering peer support can rely on Peer Support Canada to be a source of knowledge, expertise, and best practices, so that they are able to implement and operate effective peer support programming.
- Peer supporters can access consistent and high-quality, specialized training and mentorship opportunities that produce improved quality of service for participants and improved cross-country collaboration within the field of peer support.

¹Note that Peer Support Canada has no intention of undermining the excellent peer support training programs that exist across the country. Peer Support Canada will not be engaging in the delivery of “foundational” peer support training and will instead be ensuring that individuals interested in accessing this type of training are referred to organizations that are already engaging in this service delivery.

Priority Area 2:

Individual Certification and Training Accreditation

Goal:

Participants accessing peer support services, colleagues of peer supporters, and funders of peer support programs have confidence in the quality of peer support services.

Priorities:

- Peer Support Canada will offer certification for peer supporters, family peer supporters, and for peer support mentors to ensure peer support competencies and standards are being upheld. This certification will serve as acknowledgement of individuals’ capacity and commitment to the Peer Support Canada standards of practice, required competencies, and Code of Conduct.
- Peer Support Canada will offer clear, evidence-based recommendations regarding peer support training guidelines and content, with the long-term goal of offering accreditation to the training programs and/or facilitators that meet the recommendations.

Outcomes:

- Participants receiving peer support services from certified peer supporters, family peer supporters and peer support mentors will feel confident in the service. Colleagues working alongside certified peer supporters, family peer supporters and peer support mentors will trust in their colleagues’ skills and competencies.
- Organizations will be able to understand what to include within their own peer support training programs and will be better able to evaluate whether their peer support training programs are aligned with the evidence. Funders will have increased confidence in programs that follow the recommendations provided by Peer Support Canada.



Priority Area 3: Research, Evaluation, and Public Policy

Goal:

Peer Support Canada develops, contributes to, and strengthens the evidence base and recommended standards of peer support practice and helps disseminate this information to stakeholders in, and influencers of, the peer support field.

Priorities:

- Peer Support Canada will engage in research, evaluation, and demonstration projects to contribute to the evidence base surrounding peer support in collaboration with external organizations and will use a variety of research methods, including leveraging practice-based evidence where service delivery and evaluation are informed by lived and living experience expertise and knowledge. We will also foster opportunities for diverse participation and leadership within the peer support research field.
- Peer Support Canada will sit at and host policy, planning and network tables to represent the peer support field of practice through the lens of lived and living experience.

- Peer Support Canada will work with stakeholders to improve the existing recommended standards of practice and ensure that standards are developed for the various contexts in which peer support takes place.

Outcomes:

- Peer Support Canada is seen as a leader in shaping policy, research, and evaluation of the peer support field.
- Peer Support Canada sits on national leadership, research, and policy tables associated with advancing peer support.
- Decisions that impact the field of peer support are made through a lens of lived and living experience and in adherence to peer support values.



Priority Area 4: Community Education, Awareness, and Advocacy

Goal:

Peer Support Canada facilitates an increased and consistent awareness of what peer support is, its efficacy and the essential role it plays towards the holistic well-being of people in Canada.

Priorities:

- Peer Support Canada will offer an information hub, a centralized place for peer support theory, practice, training, and policy information. Resources included in this hub will be created and shared in collaboration with the peer support, workplace, and healthcare communities. We will work to ensure that accessible and relevant resources are available to a wide range of audiences and will work to amplify the voices of traditionally marginalized communities to ensure that the field of peer support includes expertise from a diverse knowledge base.

- Peer Support Canada will work actively to promote the field, practice and impacts of peer support as well as a principled stance that highlights the value of peer support within mental health and substance use health systems.

Outcomes:

- The peer support community can exchange information among diverse experts in the field, leading to improved outcomes in peer support service delivery across Canada.
- There is a strong and consistent voice of those with lived and living experience in Canada in advocating for the increased accessibility and support of peer support initiatives and in bringing awareness of the legitimacy and efficacy of peer support.



Priority Area 5: Organizational Development and Sustainability

Goal:

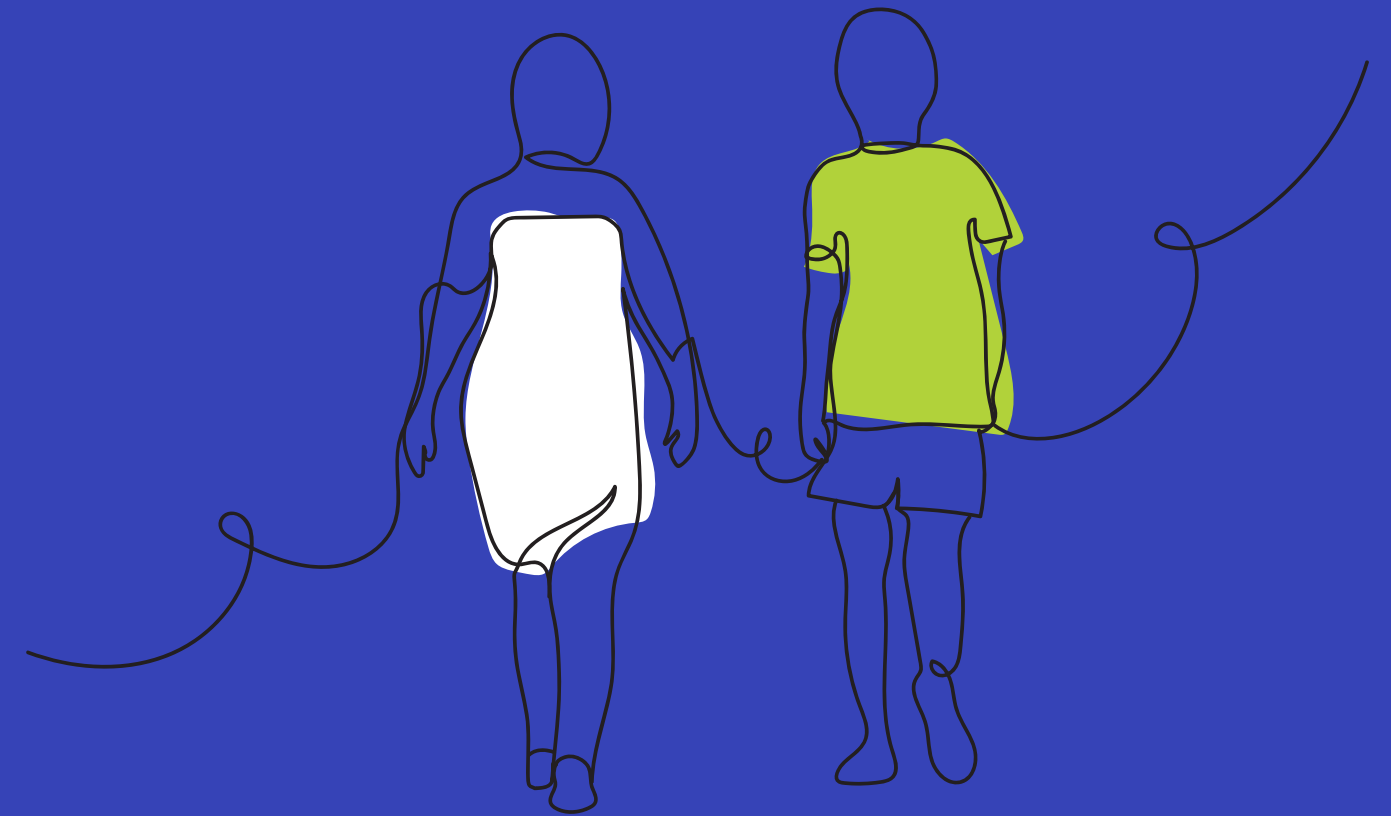
Peer Support Canada exists as a sustainable organization able to achieve its mission, with reliable access to resources, and effective governance, while maintaining ongoing engagement and consultation with the peer support community.

Priorities:

- Peer Support Canada's governance, human resources, fundraising, financial management and operations will be managed and resourced while prioritizing sustainability, anti-racism, and the values of peer support.
- The ambitious service offerings outlined in this document will be implemented in a strategically phased approach, while ensuring the sustainability of the organization as a whole.
- Peer Support Canada will create a menu of opportunities, services, connections, affiliations, and incentives to popularize and promote the connection of people and organizations to Peer Support Canada, and to each other. Examples of this include a mutually beneficial exchange membership model and the National Conference on Peer Support.

Outcomes:

- Peer Support Canada develops into an independent and sustainable organization, able to fulfill its mission through a variety of service offerings that meet the needs of the peer support community.
- Peer Support Canada builds a strong operational foundation through securing reliable funding resources and creating a supportive governance model and body.
- Peer Support Canada establishes strong reciprocal partnerships with stakeholders in the peer support field, including co-defining a new mutually benefitting relationship with CMHA National.
- The peer support community feels supported by and connected to Peer Support Canada through our diverse service offerings and membership model.



“Peer support involves mutual relationships. It’s about walking alongside someone who’s struggling with experiences like the ones I have struggled with.”

– Focus Group Participant
(peer support worker)



Peer Support Canada

Peer Support Canada recognizes that our offices are located on the lands of the Haudenosaunee, the Anishinaabe, and the treaty territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit. As a national organization, we recognize the colonial histories of stolen land, forced removal, and genocide that Indigenous Peoples have faced across Turtle Island, and the impacts that these histories have on present day. We recognize that this acknowledgement is only one small step and are committed to supporting Indigenous sovereignty and ongoing decolonization.



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