

PEER SUPPORT STRONG CONFERENCE

From Lived Experience to Lasting Impact

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2026

Virtual, free & welcome for all to attend! Registration Required.

Conference Opening (EST)	9:15 am – 9:30 am
Hayley Peek: Empowering Peer Support in the Age of AI: Human Connection, Ethics, and Lived Experience	9:30 am – 10:15 am
Misty Thaler & Mary Ellen Ruddell: Peer Support and Public Libraries: Organizing Peer Services Outside of Mainstream Systems	10:30 am – 11:15 am
Jo Brown, Glenn Petersen, & Edward Strutzenberger: Lived Experience in Action: Three Voices Driving Recovery, Learning, and Lasting Impact	11:30 am – 12:15 pm
Sarah Ryan & Bruno Baurin When Peer Supporters Design the Program: Lessons from Community-Led Co-Design	1:00 pm – 1:45 pm
Joseph Gladding & Elizabeth Callaghan: Working with Addictions and Stepping Into the Grey Areas of Best Practice: Challenging our status quo to the benefit of person-centred support	2:00 pm – 2:45 pm
Kim Sunderland: When They Don't Get It: Navigating People and Organizations Critical of Peer Support Work	3:00 pm – 3:45 pm
Conference Closing	3:45 pm – 4:00 pm

For further details & registration, please visit:

www.peerworks.ca/news-events/events

PEER SUPPORT STRONG CONFERENCE AGENDA

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9:15 AM – 10:30 AM: EMPOWERING PEER SUPPORT IN THE AGE OF AI: HUMAN CONNECTION, ETHICS, AND LIVED EXPERIENCE

DESCRIPTION: Drawing from frontline experience, this session will map the current landscape of how AI is showing up in peer support: from self-reflection and emotional processing to system navigation, motivation, and, in some cases, a substitute for connection when services are inaccessible. We will identify practical opportunities for peer supporters, including professional development, advocacy work, low-barrier self-care, and knowledge access, while also examining critical cautions such as embedded bias, privacy risks, over-reliance, and the loss of relational nuance that defines peer work.

PRESENTER: **Hayley Peek** is a Lived Experience Consultant, National Keynote Speaker, and Peer Supporter who has been working at the intersection of mental health, healing, and systems change for nearly a decade. Her experience spans both frontline peer support roles and leadership positions, offering a unique lens on the realities of mental health support at every level. Through her independent consultancy, Hayley has partnered with community agencies, post-secondary institutions, and workplaces across Canada to deliver peer-led workshops and programs grounded in empathy, equity, and trauma-informed practice. Known for her relatable and human-centered approach, Hayley weaves elements of her own story into her work to foster openness and connection. She delivers keynote talks, facilitates learning experiences, and advises organizations on embedding lived experience into strategy, policy, training, and workplace culture. Hayley has delivered hundreds of sessions across the country and continues to support organizations in creating braver, more inclusive spaces for mental health conversations.

10:30 AM – 11:15 AM: PEER SUPPORT AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES: ORGANIZING PEER SERVICES OUTSIDE OF MAINSTREAM SYSTEMS

DESCRIPTION: The topic will explore the impact of lived experience has on the members of the library. We will explore the implementation of peers at the library. We will discuss the types of engagements peers encounter as well as success and challenges, including the average of connections they make. These engagements include supportive counselling, referrals/linkages, conversations about interests and hobbies, as well as harm reduction education. Moreover, we will discuss how lived experience plays a major role on the dynamic of the library, and members with mental health, homelessness, and substance use as well as everyday conversations. The presentation will highlight some success stories/testimony from members. The presentation will highlight insight brought forward to provide evidence for the impact the peers being at the library has made.

PRESENTERS: **Misty Thaler**, she/her/hers; has obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree, Community Services Worker diploma, and a variety of certifications in the MHA sector. Thaler supports the wide variety of programming within the Peer Support Team and facilitates outcomes for both internal and external stakeholders through lived and living experience. Thaler is the one of the Peers actively working at the Hamilton Public Library supporting members through the lens of her lived experience with poverty, homelessness, and service navigation.

Mary Ellen Ruddell, she/her/hers; is the Director of Peer Support Services at the CMHA, Hamilton. Her portfolio includes building partnerships with internal and external stakeholders and maintaining trust with community partners. She has been a leader in community sector healthcare for the past 8 years with an emphasis on mental health and co-design with individuals with Lived Experience.

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11:30 AM – 12:15PM: LIVED EXPERIENCE IN ACTION: THREE VOICES DRIVING RECOVERY, LEARNING, AND LASTING IMPACT

DESCRIPTION: This presentation will share how recovery can come full circle – transforming personal healing into leadership and community change. Through three voices – a supervisor, a peer support worker, and a current resident – this presentation will explore the power of lived experience in shaping recovery programs.

PRESENTERS: **Jo Brown** is the Manager of Del-Art Recovery Home in Kenora, Ontario and a member of the Canadian Addiction Counsellors Certification Federation (CCACF). With lived experience in recovery, a Mental Health & Addiction Worker Diploma and over five years of experience in peer support, Jo now supervises and mentors other Peer Support Workers – demonstrating that lived experience can lead to leadership. She has worked with public health partners to strengthen peer programs, standardize naloxone training and promote meaningful language. Jo currently leads a SUAP funded pilot project integrating Peer Support Workers as front-line staff in the recovery home environment, giving residents the daily support and hope that lived experience brings.

Glenn Petersen, with nearly a decade in mental health and addictions, Glenn brings extensive experience from outreach work, peer program development, and cross-agency collaboration. Glenn was awarded a Certificate of Appreciation by the Nipissing Parry Sound Health Unit for his work and contributions related to the Covid-19 response to the under-housed and vulnerable population in the North Bay area. He also assisted in the creation of “Experts by Experience” at Nipissing University. Now a Peer Support Worker at a Northern Ontario recovery home, he draws on both professional and lived experience to support individuals in pre and post treatment recovery. An outdoor enthusiast and animal lover, he is committed to empowering marginalized communities.

Edward Strutzenberger, for 17 years, Edward worked underground as a miner, in a culture where addiction was simply part of life. Diagnosed with bipolar disorder at 26, he spent more than three decades navigating recovery’s ups and downs. Today, a resident of Del-Art Recovery Home, he is rediscovering balance through nature, meaningful work and connection – finding strength in helping others and rebuilding community, one step at a time.

1:00 PM – 1:45 PM: WHEN PEER SUPPORTERS DESIGN THE PROGRAM: LESSONS FROM COMMUNITY-LED CO-DESIGN

DESCRIPTION: This presentation shares the honest journey of how empowering peer supporters as program designers benefits both those who deliver support and those who receive it. We’ll explore the tensions, surprises, and transformations that emerge when lived experience holds genuine authority in program development.

PRESENTERS: **Sarah Ryan**, coordinates peer support development and community mental health programming across Nova Scotia’s Eastern Shore and Musquodoboit Valley. With over 15 years of experience in technology and maker-centered education and a background in Child and Youth Care, she brings collaborative, hands-on approaches to community-driven program design.

Bruno Baurin is a certified MHI Peer Supporter and trained yoga instructor with a specialty in yoga for first responders. He brings lived experience, trauma-informed practice, and a calm, supportive presence to his role at the Well-Being Hub, helping community members strengthen resilience and find grounding through peer connection and wellness.

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2:00 PM – 2:45 PM: WORKING WITH ADDICTIONS AND STEPPING INTO THE GREY AREAS OF BEST PRACTICE: CHALLENGING OUR STATUS QUO TO THE BENEFIT OF PERSON-CENTRED SUPPORT

DESCRIPTION: Peer support best practices were created decades ago with a primary focus on mental health, leaving limited guidance for supporting people who use substances. Certified Peer Supporter Joe Gladding believes it's time to revisit and update these approaches. This workshop explores how lived experience can have greater impact when peer support methods are re-evaluated and adapted to the current needs of substance use communities.

PRESENTERS: **Joe Gladding** is a Certified Peer Supporter with Peer Support Canada, born and raised in Stratford, Ontario. After a childhood marked by loss and undiagnosed ADHD, he turned to substance use as a coping strategy, leading to years of addiction, homelessness, incarceration, and profound disconnection.

At 35, Joe entered recovery and went on to complete McMaster's Addictions Care Worker Diploma. He has since dedicated his career to mental health and addictions work, becoming the first Peer Outreach Worker at Choices for Change (now CMHA Huron Perth). In this role, he has expanded peer support programming, strengthened community partnerships, contributed to public education, and helped advise the redesign of the National Certification for Peer and Family Peer Supporters.

Joe is deeply engaged in his community—coordinating events like International Overdose Awareness Day, training paramedics, supporting individuals and families, and nurturing his own family. He aims to promote dignity, hope, and possibility through lived experience. As he says, "I used to be a warning, but today I get to be an example."

Elizabeth Callaghan is a Nurse Practitioner with 10 years of experience, driven by a passion for managing the social determinants of health for clients of low socioeconomic status and those with concurrent disorders. She holds a Master of Nursing from Western University and is currently completing a Concurrent Disorders Certificate through the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH).

Elizabeth is the lead Nurse Practitioner for the Homeless Access to Care program with the Huron Perth Healthcare Alliance. This program, which began as a pilot project in 2021, delivers outreach primary care to individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Central to her practice is the philosophy of "meeting people where they are at," utilizing active listening to support their health goals within a person-centred, trauma-informed, and recovery-oriented framework.

In her role, Elizabeth works within an integrated treatment model, collaborating closely with Community Paramedics, Social Services, and a Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) Peer Outreach Worker. This team champions the integration of services, ensuring there is "no wrong door" for clients seeking care. This collaborative, multi-disciplinary approach embodies the core values of peer support, highlighting how shared passion and a patient-centred focus can lead to meaningful and lasting impact within clinical settings.

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3:00 PM – 3:45 PM: WHEN THEY DON'T GET IT: NAVIGATING PEOPLE AND ORGANIZATIONS CRITICAL OF PEER SUPPORT WORK

DESCRIPTION: “When They Don’t Get It” offers a compassionate and practical look at why resistance to peer support happens — and how to navigate it without losing your confidence, your boundaries, or your belief that integration is possible. Drawing from her experience and the lessons of her book *It’s All Gonna Be Okay*, Kim explores the emotional toll of working in systems that aren’t always ready for what peer supporters bring. Rather than viewing skepticism as hostility, she reframes it through Prochaska’s Stages of Change, helping participants identify when individuals or organizations are in precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, or maintenance — and how to respond skillfully at each stage. Applying a change model to organizations can reframe criticism as a part of growth rather than a barrier to it.

PRESENTER: **Kim Sunderland** is co-author of the 2013 Mental Health Commission of Canada Peer Support Guidelines and served as the inaugural Executive Director of Peer Support Canada. She is the author of *It’s All Gonna Be Okay – From Mad & Sad to Calm & Confident* (2025), a book shaped by her own lived experience and years of facilitating workshops and leading peer support initiatives in communities and workplaces. Kim’s work focuses on creating a mindset grounded in hope, inspiring people to feel more capable, connected, and supported.

3:45 PM – 4:00 PM: PEER SUPPORT STRONG CONFERENCE CLOSING



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