Bridging Gaps: Peer Support Outcomes in Emergency Shelters

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SELF HELP & PEER SUPPORT

Introduction

The purpose of the Shelter Peer Outreach Pilot was to determine if there was a need and value for Peer Mental Health Support within the Waterloo Region Houseless Population.

The Shelter Outreach Pilot was proposed based on research from Europe indicating that Peer Support was a key factor for individuals exiting chronic houselessness and maintaining stable housing.

In Memory Of

During the Shelter Outreach Pilot, two individuals who were supported sadly passed away. This presentation is in their memories.

J-Mac, the first one to one Participant for the Shelter Outreach Pilot (died January 2025)

Gino, a regular one to one Participant for the Shelter Outreach Pilot (died February 2025)

The following was required for a Peer Outreach Worker for this Pilot:

- Living expertise with a mental health and/or substance use health challenge
- Lived experience of being houseless, including street-involved/shelter/encampment/living rough
- Experienced Peer Support Worker

The Original Proposal

- ✓ Initial engagement & rapport building for the first month
- ✓ Provide One to One Support to Participants in the Shelters for approximately 1-2 months
- ✓ Expand to Peer Support Groups onsite at the Shelters within 3 months
- ✓ Identify individuals who could become volunteer Peer Navigators within the Shelter and provide support and training by the end of 6 months

The Shelters

The House of Friendship Men's Shelter

- Located at University Ave. & Weber St. in Waterloo
- Capacity for 100 men
- Employs the ShelterCare Model
- Semi-private rooms, prepared meals, onsite safe use space, counselling supports, etc.

The Working Centre's King Street Shelter (Schwaben Club)

- Located at King St. and Dixon St. in Kitchener
- Capacity for 100 individuals (mixed gender)
- Significantly under-resourced, relies heavily on Community supports (519 Collective, etc.)
- Dormitory style, pet friendly, food based on Donations, onsite safe use room.

What REALLY happened

Proposed	Reality
Engagement – First 6 weeks	As proposed
One to One Support – 6 weeks to 3 months	From the second visit to BOTH Shelters
Groups – 3 months	King St. Shelter – 10 months HoF Shelter – Did Not Happen
Identifying/Training a Peer Navigator	King St. Shelter – Potential at 1 year HoF Shelter – Did Not Happen

The Hard Base Numbers – 12 Months

Total Visits – **71**
Total Hours (Including Travel Time, Preparation, and Direct Support) – **201**
Total Direct Support Hours – **130**

Total Engagements – **379**
Total 1 to 1 Supports – **134**
Total Referrals/Other - **21**

Participant Feedback Survey

After one year of Shelter Outreach, we requested anonymous feedback from 18 Participants (we interacted with over 100 unique individuals over the year) at the two Shelters on their experience after connecting with the Peer Outreach Worker.

Their answers were scored on a 1 to 5 scale, with 5 being the best positive score for any category.

Here's what they told us….

Additional Note: 70% of Participants surveyed meet the criteria for chronic Houselessness. 30% of Participants surveyed had been Houseless for 6 months or less.

Optimism & Social/Support Connections

"Since connecting with the Peer Outreach Worker, do you feel more hopeful/optimistic about your future?"

Score: 3.9/5

"Since connecting with the Peer Outreach Worker, have you made new connections with other people and/or supports?"

Score: 3.6/5

How Important is a Peer To Shelter Participants?

"Do you look forward to seeing the Peer Outreach Worker each week?"

Score: 4.1/5

"Is talking with the Peer Outreach Worker helpful for you?"

Score: 3.7/5

Peers Meet Participants Where They're At

"Has the Peer Outreach Worker been non-judgmental, open, and met you where you are at?

Score: 4.4/5

How They Feel Now

"Do you feel…"

"…More in control of your life?"

77% said Yes. 23% said No.

"…More energetic or motivated?"

66% said Yes. 44% said No.

"…Less isolated and alone?"

92% said Yes. 8% said No.

Staff Feedback Survey

In addition, we requested feedback from 15 Staff members at the two Shelters on their observations of the effects of having a Peer Outreach Worker.

Their answers were scored on a 1 to 5 scale, with 5 being the best positive score for any category.

Here's what they told us….

Additional Note: 100% of the staff surveyed had been working in the houseless sector for more than 3 months.

Positive Outlook/Self-Advocacy

"Do any individuals seem to have a more positive outlook about their future?"

Score: 3.5/5

"Have you noticed any individuals taking the lead in advocating for what they need/want?"

Score: 3.5/5

They're More Social & Communicative

"Do any individuals have an increase in social and/or service connections?"

Score: 3.9/5

"Have there been improvements for some individuals around their communication and self-efficacy?"

Score: 3.5/5

Having Peer Support is Helpful

"Overall, has the Peer Outreach Worker been a helpful resource/support for your residents?"

Score: 4.1/5

Staff Noticed Changes after having a Peer Outreach Worker in the Shelter

"Have any individuals demonstrated a decrease in…"

"…Drug Poisonings"

50% said Yes. 50% said No.

"…Escalated Behaviours"

57% said Yes. 43% said No.

"…Substance Use"

14% said Yes. 86% said No.

Referrals – Internal

Self Help & Peer Support – 3 (2 Participants attend Groups/One to One, 1 Participant in Entrepreneurship)

Mental Health & Justice Program – 2 Participants

Integrated Crisis Centre – Approximately 10 Participants

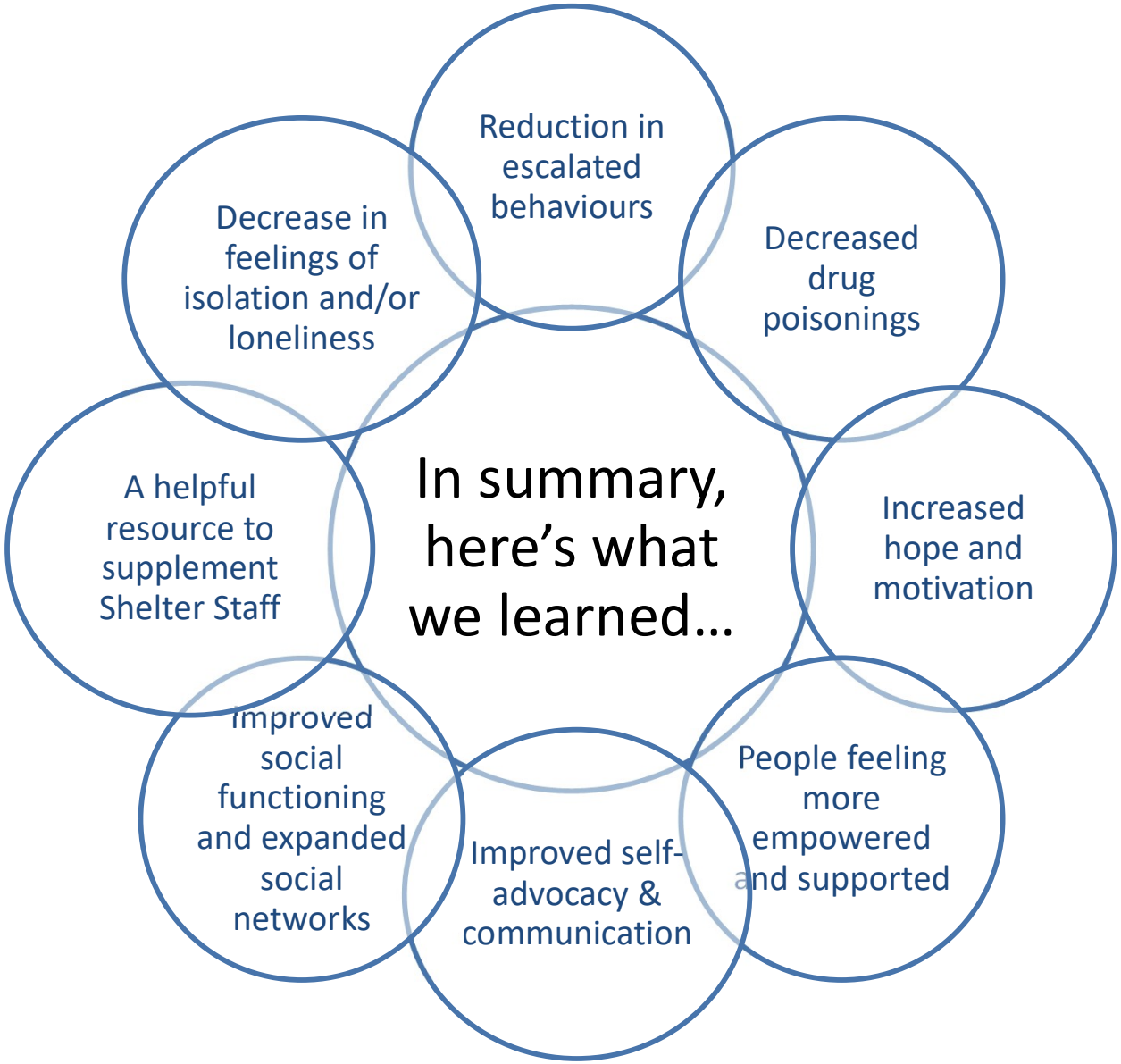
External Referrals/Other

- Support coordinating with the 519 Community Collective to meet the needs of individuals in the Shelter
- Two Referrals to the Waterloo Community Legal Services
- Supported an ongoing relationship with the Waterloo Wellington Buddhist Monastery & Meditation Centre and the TWC Shelter
- Supported 3 Participants in connecting with MPP and MP offices to work on resolution to government services related issues (Employment Insurance, ODSP, Other)

Onsite Peer Group
Finding My Way

Based on an old 2009 Self Help published book titled “Finding My Way”, a five week Peer Support Group was run at the King St. Shelter. We had a total attendance of 21 Participants – all female, all over the age of 45.

Summary of the Shelter Pilot Results



Why The Pilot Ended at 12 Months

The Pilot intended to be 6 months long, however, it was extended to 12 months due to initial promising results. At 12 months, we were forced to end our work with TWC's King St. Shelter due to its closure. This also resulted in ending the Pilot with House of Friendship. Shortly after, we were contacted by Women's Crisis Services of Waterloo Region and asked to run a similar collaborative Pilot project with them. We are now 6 weeks into the new Pilot.

Contact Information

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