



Closing the Gap:

Strengthening the State of Peer Support in Ontario

Recommendations in response to the findings from
“Investigating the State of Peer Support in Ontario”.

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Closing the Gap : OPDI's Plan for Strengthening Peer Support in Ontario

Background context Ontario has a long history of government funding for consumer-led initiatives. Peer support has emerged from grassroots political movement, locating itself outside formal services, to becoming a research-informed best practice. Peer support is being delivered within diverse settings, takes on many forms and is both voluntary and informal and increasingly offered as a paid form of mental health support to advance personal recovery and systemic change.

From margins to mainstream Significant changes have occurred in Canada and internationally within the peer support movement. People with lived experience are articulating the elements of care that have helped them in their recovery, as well as barriers, and harmful practices within mental health services. Peer support has moved from an alternative to mental health services to become a recognized best practice and recommended element of mainstream mental health services.

Peer support as a component of care is evolving and has moved beyond focusing on the provision of emotional support and information towards an increasingly knowledge and skill-based toolkit of peer-defined support and services focused on advancing personal recovery, personal choice, empowerment, social inclusion, protecting rights and advocating for a system and societal change. Consumer leaders are developing important innovative approaches to strengthen health and wellness and the sense of personal power and control such as Wellness Recovery Action Plans, Intentional Peer Support, Recovery Colleges, Emotional First Aid, Peer Zone etc.

Recovery works Research confirms what people with lived experience have long known - peer support works!

- Participation in peer support improves recovery outcomes
- Improves quality of life and greater social and occupational inclusion
- Reduces symptom distress, hospital admission rates and use of emergency services
- Reduces self-stigma and strengthens advocacy to address stigma and fight discrimination
- Peer support workers offer the opportunity for a supportive, empowering relationship.
- Important compliment to traditional clinical service
- Involvement of peer support workers within services helps to positively promote cultural change within services, adoption of recovery-oriented practices and encourages reflective practice amongst staff

Canada is a leader Considerable work has been done by consumer leaders across Canada to clarify peer support and build a case for its adoption across mental health services. Building on this work will allow OPDI to accelerate efforts at strengthening peer support. [The Mental Health Strategy of Canada Changing Direction, Changing Lives](#)¹ promotes peer support as an essential component within a recovery-oriented mental health system and recommends an increase in the number of peer support opportunities and funding to support the development of training, certification and coordination of peer support. The Strategy acknowledges that peer support initiatives can have a great impact on a person's journey of recovery and that the

¹ Mental Health Commission of Canada. (2012). Changing directions, changing lives: The mental health strategy for Canada. Calgary, AB: Author.

relationship forged between the peer supporter and the person with a mental health problem or illness can help improve quality of life. Expanding the use of peer support is promoted as a means to alleviating some of the pressure on Canada's strained health care system and save money by reducing the need for hospitalization and use of emergency services. However, despite their effectiveness, peer support programs receive very little funding.

[Making the Case for Peer Support \(2010\)](#)² a national consumer-led research study reviewed the evidence for peer support and through extensive consultation with people involved in peer support identified ways to strengthen the state of peer support in Canada. This research identified that peer support across Canada is not reflective of the emerging trends or best practices in peer support. Four critical recommendations were: 1) Develop guidelines on the definition of peer support as a core component of mental health systems; 2) Develop guidelines for the funding of peer support; 3) Create guidelines to support the development of peer support; 4) Use this report and/or the guidelines developed to highlight the need for peer support, educate regional governments, health authorities and to develop a national resource centre for peer support. In response to this report [The Peer Project](#), convened to evaluate the effectiveness of workplace-based peer support programs. Peer support leaders from across Canada (including OPDI) informed the development of [Guidelines for the Practice and Training of Peer Support](#) (2013)³ to develop peer support capacity in Canada while strengthening existing initiatives.

[Peer Support Accreditation and Certification \(Canada\)](#) [PSACC] was created as a not-for-profit organization to provide national certification and accreditation services based on nationally endorsed standards of practice for mental health peer supporters, undertake research and evaluation on peer-delivered mental health services and programs. PSACC developed the [Standards of Practice](#)⁴ for certification contain - the mandatory requirements for a peer supporter to obtain a national certification credential - these were [developed in consultation with peer support workers from across Canada](#). A certification handbook outlines the knowledge, skills and experience requirements to be eligible for PSACC accreditation. A supporting [Knowledge Matrix](#) offers an audit tool that can be purchased for use by peer support training programs to assist in aligning training content with the PSACC Standards of Practice. Voluntary National peer support certification process is available to peer supporters and peer support training programs that meet PSACC's requirements. [PSACC's National Peer Support Conference](#) is providing a venue to strengthen the leadership of peer support, share the growing global knowledge and skills of peer support, and creating a national conversation to promote the value of peer support and influence policy planners and funders to make peer support assessable to all.

² O'Hagan Mary, Cyr Céline, McKee Heather and Priest Robyn, for the Mental Health Commission of Canada (2010). Making the case for peer support: Report to the Peer Support Project Committee of the Mental Health Commission of Canada

³ Sunderland, Kim, Mishkin, Wendy, Peer Leadership Group, Mental Health Commission of Canada. (2013). Guidelines for the Practice and Training of Peer Support. Calgary, AB: Mental Health Commission of Canada.

⁴ [Standards of Practice](#) PSACC National Certification Handbook – Version 2. 2014

[Recovery-Oriented Practice Guidelines: Hope. Dignity. Inclusion.](#) A critical step in implementing Canada's Nation Strategy was the development of the Guidelines for Recovery-Oriented Practice. This comprehensive Canadian reference document was built on consultation and strengthens understanding recovery in practice and promoting a consistent application of recovery principles across the country at a policy, program and practice level. Promoting the importance of peer support is embedded throughout the document and includes guidance on how to work effectively with people with lived experience as partners in program delivery, the importance of self-reflection, co-development knowledge, program development, evaluation, policy and governance, education, training and research.

Ontario Peer Development Initiative

For 25 years, OPDI has played an important role in providing support, coordination, research, training, and advocacy for peer support and consumer-led initiatives across Ontario. One of OPDI's greatest strength is its grassroots base of support. Member groups understand local issues and concerns and strengthen OPDI's advocacy efforts. OPDI is able to strengthen the knowledge and skill of its membership, offer a provincial perspective and equip members with the tools they need to work effectively in their communities. Member groups deliver a broad range of consumer-survivor initiative in diverse community settings. Increasingly this includes the formalized role of peer support worker within mental health services.

OPDI supports its member groups by:

- Promoting networking opportunities
- Informing members of policy, program and legislative decisions that impact their activities
- Consult membership to identify issues and concerns
- Serving as a trusted voice for consumer initiatives with government and stakeholders
- Partnering with government and stakeholders to promote systemic change
- Educating stakeholder on the value of recovery and peer support
- Advocating for the inclusion and equitable funding of peer support programs

OPDI has been playing a critical role in the enhancing the skills of Ontario's peer support workforce through its [OPDI Peer Support Core Essentials™](#) program using face-to-face and webinar based training and building capacity by ongoing education of its trainer community of practice. OPDI has also played a leadership role in identifying new opportunities to apply peer support across mental health supports and services and demonstrating their efficacy. For example OPDI delivered peer support training to 80 peer support workers to support people living with chronic illness to manage their condition through the [Diabetes and Mental Health Peer Support Program](#), created to educate peer support workers to provide diabetes self-management support to their peers.

Our stories are medicine

Story-telling is a critical part of how peer support assists people with their recovery. It is by sharing our stories that we are able to see ourselves more clearly, with less judgment and more compassion. Stories can strengthen hope, empower, and liberate. They can help us heal, and transcend adversity. Stories have the power to change hearts and minds and turn those who struggle into teachers and leaders.

OPDI and its member groups can help to bring research to life and educate stakeholders about the value of peer support and the role peers play in supporting the recovery journey by capturing and conveying these stories.

CLOSING THE GAP - Strengthening Peer Support in Ontario

State of peer support in Ontario

In 2014 Ontario Peer Development Initiative and the Evidence Exchange Network, the Self-Help Alliance (Waterloo Region) collaborated to research the current state of peer support in Ontario. *Investigating the State of Peer Support in Ontario* identifies the current strengths, challenges, and context facing peer support workers in Ontario. The research identifies specific priority areas and makes recommendations for organizational, system-level policy regarding peer support positions. Key informants in this review included volunteer-based and paid peer support workers as well as a small number of employers.

Research Highlight

- Across Ontario, the role of peer support is expanding including the adoption of paid peer support positions within formal mental health services. However, this growth is haphazard or uninformed by a strategic workforce development plan. Access to peer support remains limited.
- Of the 155 peer support responders, over two-thirds are not connected to OPDI or to a local Consumer/Survivor Initiative. Most report a lack of access to critical peer support for themselves, training, education, or mentorship opportunities.
- Peer support workers are engaged in a diversity of roles and responsibilities and are working in a wide variety of employment contexts. This study reports over 40 different job descriptions and a wide range of responsibilities and with little consistency in the job descriptions, recruitment practices or hiring qualifications for peer support workers including agreement on the required level of education, employment experience, training, or how 'lived experience' will be leveraged.
- The current consumer leadership and peer support workforce do not reflect the diversity of Ontario's population. This lack of diversity is consistent with the broader staffing of mental health services.
- Access to peer support is beneficial to diverse populations and participation is enhanced when peer workers reflect the diversity of their community making the diversification of the peer support workforce essential to access.
- The role of peer support is expanding beyond the provision of emotional support and information to include supporting personal recovery and advocating for systemic change. This expanded role requires knowledge and skills to effectively deliver. Access to training is limited and cost represents a significant barrier to access.
- There is a perceived lack of clarity and understanding of the role of peer support within mental health services as well as amongst peer support workers. This lack of clarity makes it hard to build consistency, manage expectations, define performance indicators, or measure equivalency in pay scales.
- Peer support is a challenging role within mainstream mental health services. Core to the peer support role is empowering service users, advocating for choice and challenging practices inconsistent with meeting recovery goals. Working as a peer within a clinical setting can trigger past traumas or challenge the mental health of peer support workers. This reality requires a unique approach to supervision. Opportunities for supervision, support, mentorship, and connection with peer support networks is critical but missing.

- The current peer support workforce is well educated and employers are seeking post-secondary education in recruitment. However, relative to other positions with similar responsibilities, peer support workers are underpaid, have less opportunity for full-time employment, fewer benefits, or income and job security.
- Peer support workers report feeling a lack of respect, value and understanding of their role. They also report facing prejudice and stigma associated with being a mental health consumer. This is consistent with research on stigma and discrimination within mental health services.

Peer Support Consultations: Summary

OPDI engaged a consumer-consultant to identify priorities with peer support workers emerging from this scan and set a vision for going forward. The priority challenges identified include: 1) building role clarity, 2) strengthening training, 3) building the structures to support peer support positions including supervision, mentorship, accommodations, and 4) increasing access to paid peer support positions.

Vision

Peer supporters envision a future where there is a vibrant, healthy and valued peer support workforce; when all stakeholders share a clear and consistent understanding of the important role that peer support workers play, the diversity of settings they can work within, and the best practice elements that support their work. They look forward to a future where 'lived experience' is uniformly valued and effectively leveraged to promote personal recovery and systemic change and funding is available to grow consumer-survivor initiatives and expand the inclusion of paid peer support across services.

This growing workforce has access to mentorship, peer-to-peer support and the training they need within and outside their workplace. Organizations have policies, practices and structures that are co-created and peer support friendly and strengthen recruitment, hiring, pay equity, job security and supervision practices.

All stakeholders see the development of peer support as a shared commitment, work as allies to enhance access to peer support and collaborate with people with lived experience in mutual learning and in the co-develop the knowledge, skills, practices and research to transform the mental health system to become recovery-oriented.

Work plan notes

This high-level strategic action plan is targeted at addressing the priorities identified within Investigating the State of Peer Support Report to improve peer support practice, strengthen the peer support network in Ontario and further OPDI's mission and goals.

To enhance success the plan:

- 1) Builds on existing resources in peer support;
- 2) Sets out a few clear high-impact priorities that are doable within existing resources; and
- 3) Engages OPDI's membership to take coordinated action.

Closing the Gap: Strategic Work Plan

1. Build a common understanding of peer support

Consumer leaders from across the country have developed clear, succinct and research-informed guidelines that define peer support as a core component of the mental health service system. PSSAC Standards of Practice include definitions and types of peer support, core values, standards, performance indicators, and outcome measures. Making a Case for Peer Support provides a strong Canada-focused research-base for peer support. The MHCC Recovery-Oriented Practice Guidelines provides clear guidance to staff, managers, and policy makers regarding the value of developing a peer support workforce and how to effectively work with people with 'lived experience'.

However, the application of this knowledge and available tools amongst Ontario's CSI's and peer support community has been limited. Nor is this knowledge being uniformly applied within mental health services that implement peer support. OPDI can accelerate the creation of a common understanding of peer support by building on existing resources, encouraging knowledge exchange, promoting the uptake of best practices and by sharing emerging trends in the delivery of peer support.

OPDI can also strengthen the peer community by developing educational and marketing tools from a peer support perspective and encouraging their uniform application. By developing templates, member groups can customize these tools including their organization name, contact information, and logo. This will help promote member groups and create a clear consistent message on peer support.

Changing hearts and minds to respect and value peer support requires engaging in passionate story-telling. OPDI and its member groups can help capture and create compelling story-based educational tools that illuminate why peer support is valued, how its delivered, the alignment of peer support within recovery-oriented practices and what supports its delivery within mental health services.

1A) Endorse and share existing resources:

OPDI can strengthen knowledge exchange and uptake by identifying and sharing high-level research, reports, guidelines, and by extracting key messages to use in education, training, and advocacy.

- OPDI's leadership endorse existing guidelines for example: Making a Case for Peer Support, Guidelines for the Practice of Peer Support, the MHCC Recovery-Oriented Practice Guidelines as important guides to building knowledge on peer support and influencing change.
- OPDI promote the importance of peer support training as a requirement for employment.
- OPDI leadership endorses and encourages all members to sign PSSAC's Code of Conduct.
- OPDI endorse the value of National certification through PSSAC to increase the skill, quality, and consistency of peer support practice.
- OPDI link its members and stakeholders to PSSAC through its website.

Member groups commit to consistently use these resources to build role clarity.

Member groups endorse PSSAC and the importance of training and certification.

Member groups endorse and adhere to PSSAC's Peer Support Code of Conduct.

1B) Build a reference library of supporting resources

- OPDI takes a lead in gathering existing resources, which describe and strengthen the role of peer support workers with a priority of consumer-developed research, guidelines and practice tools.
- OPDI will track global trends in peer support and share links and resources.
- OPDI will encourage the sharing of emerging practices as a recurring theme in its conference.
- OPDI will encourage groups to link this resource base to their websites.

Member groups are actively engaged to contribute to this inventory.

Member groups promote this resource and link it to their website (if available).

1C) Create a Peer Support Worker section within OPDI's website

- Undertake a review of OPDI's website and communication tools and consider how it can profile and strengthen the knowledge and value of the role of peer support workers.
- OPDI will expand its website to include a high-level description of:
 - The historical and cultural context of peer support in mental health care.
 - A description of the role of the peer support worker, guiding values and principles of practice.
 - Description of the value and application of 'lived experience' within effective peer support.
 - Describe the skills, abilities and personal attributes of a peer support worker.
 - Includes the high-level outline of standards of practice and code of conduct with links to PSSAC.
 - Outline the knowledge and training requirement to meet certification standards.
 - Link to OPDI Peer Support Core Essentials Training program.

Member groups will review their website, educational and marketing tools and consider how to strengthen the knowledge and value of the role of peer support workers.

Member groups will link their websites to OPDI content areas, Peer Support Guidelines and PSSAC's Standards of Practice.

1D) OPDI create branded marketing tools

- OPDI create a template 'what is peer support' brochure.
- OPDI develop an educational powerpoint presentation to create a consistent message and clear call to action on peer support.
- Create a common 'questions and answers' page on peer support.
- Create on-line educational resources including first person stories describing value and impact of peer support i.e. videos, blog, podcasts etc. promoting peer support.
- OPDI will track emerging practices in peer support and promote trends through the OPDI newsletter.
- OPDI will promote the availability of these resources across OPDI's network.

Member groups will customize and use these tools in their education and training to deliver a common message across all stakeholder groups and to inform their advocacy efforts.

1E) Deliver presentations on peer support

- OPDI identify opportunities to deliver standardized presentations to educate stakeholders on the role of peer support and encourage support in enhancing access to peer support.

Member groups identify opportunities to educate stakeholders including in-service education, LIHNs, community groups, members of parliament and city council, media etc.

2. Strengthen the peer support workforce

OPDI has structured itself as an 'organization of organizations' and its services, resources, and advocacy efforts have reflected the identified priorities of its membership. However, CSIs across Ontario are disappearing and being absorbed into mental health services. The majority of paid peer support positions are developing outside the support of OPDI or involvement with local CSIs. Peer support workers are looking for a closer connection with their peers, greater opportunities for peer-led training, access to networks of support and mentorship opportunities. Without this network, their capacity to advocate for change is diminished. The capacity, knowledge, and skills of local CSI's to provide ongoing education, training, and mentorship is inconsistent.

This study highlights a lack of knowledge and expertise within mainstream services on how to effectively support this emerging workforce. This is creating tensions in understanding the role of peer support workers, supervision and support that is misaligned to the needs of peer support workers and a risk of diluting the core practice and transformative capacity of peer support. OPDI can enlarge its evolving membership base and strengthen its advocacy efforts by including the voices of this emerging sector into the OPDI community.

2A) Expand membership

OPDI is positioned to provide support to and grow the peer support workforce. OPDI's advocacy efforts will be stronger and more credible if it can engage individual peer support worker and in partnership with them develop work-place guidelines to improve employment practices.

- OPDI should undertake a review of its current membership structure and consider creating an individual membership category that would allow OPDI to engage all peer support workers across the province. If legislation restricts opening up membership consider other ways to actively involve individual peer support workers.
- OPDI can build a data-base of peer support workers both within and outside CSI's networks.
- OPDI explore its offerings to individual members considers networking, skill development, access to the annual conference, training, mentorship, support, and advocacy.

Member groups review programs and identify ways of enhancing support and training opportunities for independent peer support workers.

Member groups work with local stakeholders to offer experiential expertise in developing peer support programs and in co-developing training and support opportunities.

Member groups reach out and engage local peer support workers in their networks.

2B) Building diversity within peer support

Making a Case for Peer Support and this current environmental scan has identified the lack of cultural, ethnic, racial, sexual orientation and age and gender diversity as a barrier to inclusion.

There is an identified need to explore ways to strengthen collaboration and build diversity across mental health services.

- OPDI can identify and connect with provincial focused organizations and groups serving diverse populations to identify opportunities for partnership.
- OPDI can undertake informational interviews with service provider groups working effectively with diverse communities to identify strategies for building diversity across peer support.
- Identify peer support worker programs operating within diverse communities and build reciprocal opportunities for training, membership and to create alliances in advocacy. Invite leaders to present at OPD's annual conference to present on building inclusive practices.
- Promote identified best practices and create key messages on building diversity through peer support and share across OPDI's network.

Member groups can undertake an environmental scan to better understand the diversity within their community and if that diversity is reflected within the staff, volunteers and members of their group.

Member groups can identify organizations and groups within their community working effectively with diverse communities and engage them and identify strategies for building diversity across peer support.

2C) Develop a training strategy

Providing peer support is moving beyond sharing support and information to include a deeper knowledge and skill base in promoting recovery and consumer-developed tools to support choice and empowerment.

- OPDI promotes the importance of skill development of the peer support and CSI workforce to ensure a common knowledge, skill and values are consistently applied across all programs and peer-delivered services.
- OPDI review its Peer Support Core Essentials Training program against PSSAC's [Knowledge Matrix](#) and revise training to strengthen alignment
- OPDI encourages trainers to demonstrate competence through completion of the Certification Program with PSSAC.
- OPDI shares, through exclusive access to its member groups, PSSAC's [Knowledge Matrix](#) to ensure training at the local level aligns with identified best practices.
- OPDI build into its annual conference workshops and training opportunities to build knowledge and skills in the delivery of recovery-oriented peer support and to share emerging trends and new approaches.

2D) OPDI Government Relations Strategy

The MHCC has identified that peer support is a valued and a significantly under-funded resource. It calls on all governments to incorporate peer support as a best practice and adequately fund its development. Building a Case for Peer Support also identified the need for consumer-led organizations to better understand the 'levers of power' that influence policy change. Promoting the value of peer support is a shared responsibility and requires identifying allies and engaging partners in shared advocacy.

- Using its annual conference OPDI will establish a training stream on strengthening government relations and tools of effective advocacy. Identify effective advocates and invite experts in advocacy to present.

- OPDI make a presentation to Treasury Board on the cost-effectiveness of peer support, its ability to promote recovery, reduce system pressures and achieve significant savings by reducing hospitalizations, use of emergency services and correctional services.
- Reach out and collaborate with groups with a shared interest in promoting systemic change (Ontario Human Rights Commission, Guaranteed Income, Housing and Anti-Poverty Coalitions etc.) and identify ways to partner.
- Utilize the Recovery-Oriented Practice Guidelines as a tool for lobbying for funding the expansion of peer support in mental health services.
- Make supporting the value of peer support a requirement for accepting requests to participate in research, collaborations etc.
- Develop communications and advocacy tools to support member groups in their ability to deliver a clear consistent message to planning bodies, politicians and government policy planners.

Member groups will engage their local councilors, members of parliament and LHINs to educate them on the value of peer support and using co-developed key messaging make a case for expanded funding.

3. Build Communities of Practice

The key to the success of peer support programs - both those that are independently run and those that are located within mainstream mental health organizations - is to hold on to the values of peer support and its unique features, while at the same time providing adequate funding and support to run efficient and effective programs. OPDI can build a provincial collaborative advisory group including employment managers and human resource experts to develop employment guidelines for supporting peer support workers.

3A) Develop guidelines for peer support friendly employment practices

- Undertake a research and literature review on the approaches to supervision within peer support to inform recommend.
- Gather existing peer support job descriptions, review and recommend peer support worker job descriptions.
- Review PSSACs competencies and recommended qualifications and experience for peer support workers.
- Develop recommendations for consumer-friendly hiring practices
- Recommend orientation and training guidelines for staff and peer support workers
- Based on research provide peer defined guidelines for supervision models and practices
- Create guidelines for co-hiring and co-supervision models between CSIs and mainstream mental health services.
- Drawing on Recovery-oriented practice guidelines and experiential expertise develop guidelines for effective collaboration with local consumer-survivor initiatives.
- Utilize the Recovery-Oriented Practice Guidelines as a reference in guiding staff, managers and policy makers on the knowledge, skills and resources needed to strengthen peer support and work effectively with people with lived experience
- Create guidelines on 'best practices' in utilizing 'lived experience' expertise.

Member groups can create regional communities of practice to inform the development of peer support friendly employment practices

Member groups can engage individuals, groups, and organizations to serve as advocates for peer support to promote the funding, growth and development of this sector.