

**PeerWorks – Remarks to Ontario Parliament’s
Standing Committee on Finance on Economic Affairs**

Jan. 9, 2024

- Thank you for this opportunity to present to this committee today. I am Allyson Theodorou, Operations Director at PeerWorks (formerly the Ontario Peer Development Initiative), I am joined here today by Andrea Schaefer, President of the Board of Directors at PeerWorks and a peer support worker at ConnectWell Community Health.
- I am presenting to you to outline the needs of our community-based peer and family support organizations that include our network of no-barrier mental health and addiction centres commonly referred to as Consumer Survivor Initiatives (CSIs) and front-line peer support workers across the province.
- I am also advocating for an increase to PeerWorks’ annual operating budget.
- As we continue to share our message with government and the public, we are finding that there is still some education that needs to be done on what peer support is, and particularly, what **community-based peer and family support is**.
- The main thing we would like you to take away with you from our presentation today is that our **unique** segment of the Mental Health and Addictions sector requires acknowledgment.
- Many of the consumer/survivor initiatives and peer support organizations that make up our membership operate drop-in centres, some in high-risk regions across this province, including many in your own ridings. In many cases, these resources act as the first point of entry for those seeking help in Ontario’s MH&A system and also an effective prevention strategy when moderating challenging life events.
- We are low to no barrier – Our programming operates as a fully non-judgmental space, we don’t ask for ID, we don’t require an appointment or

a referral, we do not have wait lists.

- Our centres and programs are run by people with lived-experience of mental health and addictions, for people with lived experience.
- Peer Support is rooted in principles of recovery, hope, and individual empowerment
- Peer Supporter Workers come from all different backgrounds and have specialized training for this professional role.
- Our members support those people who fall through the cracks, or who have nowhere else to turn.
- They can connect/reconnect people to clinical partners and provide them support while they wait for other services.
- I just want to reiterate, peer support programs are low-barrier for many who are experiencing minor to acute mental illness to access help, we turn nobody away.
- PeerWorks, with over 50 dedicated members, including organizations and individuals, has been at the forefront of providing essential services to these essential organizations and professionals.
- Our leadership and support have been in the form of professional development, networking opportunities, administrative support, regional marketing, peer support training, and government advocacy for the past 32 years.
- **As the sole pan-provincial voice for lived experience**, community-based peer support programs, and frontline peer support professionals, PeerWorks has played a pivotal role in various mental health and addictions initiatives, including the Weekly Mental Health and Addiction COVID-19 Response Planning Table.
- In May 2023, PeerWorks held its inaugural Queen's Park Peer Support Education Day, where our members could interact with you and your government colleagues. We thank Minister Tibollo for making such kind

remarks at our lunch reception and expressing support for the vital role that peer support plays for Ontarians.

- Our current operating budget of \$300,000 annually has proven inadequate and unrealistic. This funding is provided through a Transfer Payment Agreement (TPA) with the Mental Health and Addictions Centre of Excellence and has not increased since its inception, in fact, it has decreased.
- Despite being a recognized leader in the sector, our organization has been operating on a shoestring budget, hindering our ability to fully meet the demands of our mandate and support our dedicated members effectively.
- Our other request is that this government consider innovating the way that our community-based peer support organizations are funded. Possibly leveraging PeerWorks to serve as a single flow-through funding partner for community-based peer and family support organizations and programs.
- The current funding model also means that a uniform level of care, with standards in service delivery across our segment is impossible to achieve.
- We understand that under-resourcing in the community-based mental health and addictions sector is not a problem exclusive to our segment. However, we do hope that a review of how CSIs and other peer support programs are funded can be part of a budget commitment designed to enable community-based care models like ours.
- The government's commitment to mental health and addictions, as outlined in the "Roadmap to Wellness" plan, is commendable.
- The 5% increase to our current operating budgets in the 2023 Budget was a step in the right direction, reflecting government's understanding of the importance of community-based care. However, much more is needed to address the persistent challenges faced by organizations like ours.
- I have been with this organization for over 30 years and I have personally witnessed the power of peer support. I come to work everyday knowing that this work changes lives.

- We hope the government considers our requests today, and we'd be happy to take any questions.