

ISSUES IMPACTING PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERTISE (PWLE) OF DRUG USE WORKING IN HARM REDUCTION

Project Summary:

This project examined some benefits and negative aspects of 'peer' employment among people with lived expertise OF drug use working in harm reduction in Canada. Between October 2-5, 2018, 50 surveys were completed at the *National Stimulus: Drugs, Policy and Practice in Canada* conference, a three-day gathering held in Edmonton, Alberta. The study stems from a research initiative that operates as a component of CRISM (Canadian Research Initiative in Substance Misuse), with a national working group of people with lived expertise (PWLE) OF drug use associated with four regional nodes across Canada: British Columbia; Ontario; Quebec and the Maritimes, and the Prairies.

TOP CONCERNS FOR PWLE IN HARM REDUCTION

1. STIGMA

"When do I stop being a 'peer'?" (Winnipeg)

2. LACK OF SALARY

3. PAY DIFFERENCE FOR 'PEERS'

4. TRAUMA FROM FRONTLINE WORK

5. LACK OF BENEFITS

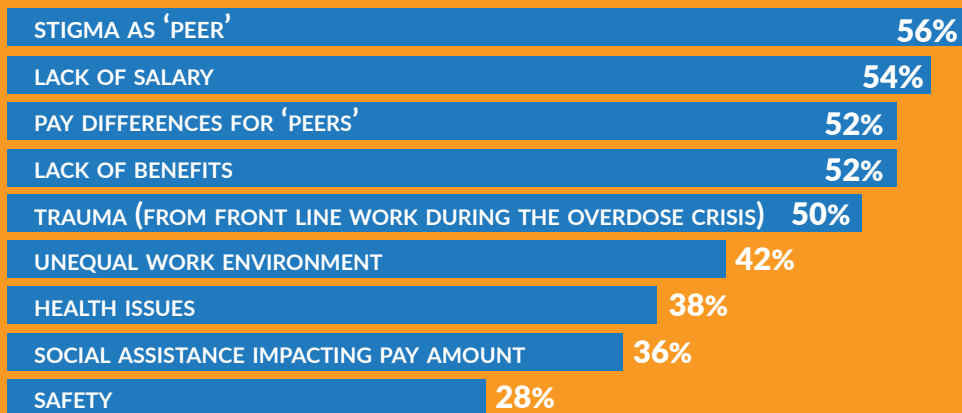
6. UNEQUAL WORK ENVIRONMENT

7. HEALTH ISSUES

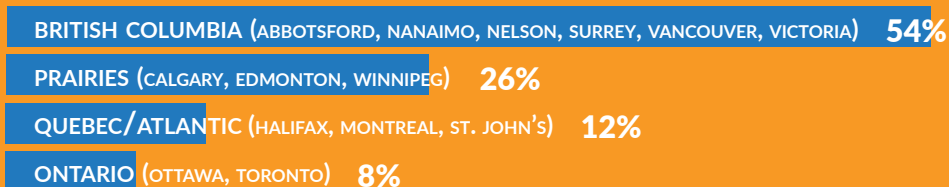
8. SOCIAL ASSISTANCE IMPACTING PAY AMOUNTS

9. SAFETY

ISSUES THAT MOST IMPACT 'PEER' WORK



NODE (GEOGRAPHIC AREA)



DEMOGRAPHICS MEAN AGE: 43.58 YRS

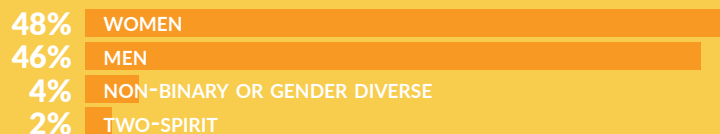
FORMS OF 'PEER' PAYMENT



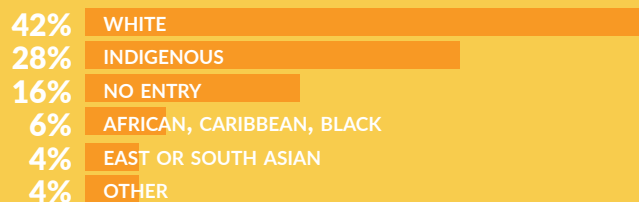
HOURS OF WORK



GENDER



ETHNICITY/RACE



BENEFITS OF WORKING IN HARM REDUCTION

KNOWLEDGE AND SKILL BUILDING

"Knowing that through [my work] that I saved a life...for people who have stigma to teach, to not feel like scum..." (Ottawa)



WORK VALUED EXPERTISE: AS A PWLE OF DRUG USE

"It wasn't too long ago that what I had to say was dismissed based by appearance and how I lived my life. Today I have a voice and am able to use it to speak for those who have not found their own voice yet." (Surrey)



EMPOWERMENT AND CONFIDENCE BUILDING

"I feel like I help people, I help change the status quo, normalize drug use, defend me and my comrades' rights." (Montreal)

NEGATIVES OF WORKING IN HARM REDUCTION

UNRECOGNIZED WORK/EXPERTISE AND WAGE INEQUITIES

"My peer work is valuable so I should be paid in money, not gift cards or stipends." (Ottawa)

"Low wages, no benefits!" (Toronto)



TOKENISM

"...Tokenistic engagement. Patronizing response from non-drug user "experts". Risks of being "outed" to RCMP and MCFD (Ministry of Children and Family Development) in my community." (Abbotsford)

STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION

"I don't often disclose my 'peeriness' due to a concern of not being taken for what I am." (St. Johns)

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

1. Pay equity, employment and health benefits, and increased support and resources

"Meal support. I need understanding and support with transport to work but most employment won't or can't support bus fare." (Winnipeg)

"Equal pay for peer support. As peer support workers bring a different set of skills to the table as someone with lived experience." (Edmonton)



2. Address the tokenization and devaluing of people who use drugs (PWLE)

"Pay me much more. Let me use openly at work. Listen to me. Stop fetishizing/tokenizing me (I don't speak for all drug users so they should stop asking me). Acknowledge I'm a victim of the drug war and my colleagues are then more privileged." (Montreal)



3. Organizational restructuring that promotes equitable, anti-racist, feminist, and transparent practices and policies including increased leadership roles for PWLE

"[We need] to make the system set up more available for peer support and aboriginal individuals to be able to be managers and our team leads and to be treated with respect and valued for their lived experience and to be viewed as just as important." (Edmonton)

"... run on a model that lets everyone get a chance to facilitate, schedule, 'run the show'" (Nanaimo)



4. Increase in community services