

# Trusting Potential

The Benefits and How-To  
of Hiring People with Lived  
Experience of Homelessness

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*A Report by Change Toronto*

*November 2010*



## Background

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Change Toronto is a network of representatives from social service sector, government and business as well as people with lived experience of homelessness\* who are working together to find innovative and collaborative approaches to addressing homelessness in Toronto. Change Toronto provides opportunities for discussion, idea sharing and action on the causes, impacts and solutions to homelessness in Toronto. Central to Change Toronto is the belief that in order to find new and effective solutions to homelessness, multiple stakeholders need to be involved and most importantly, people who have first-hand experience with homelessness need to have an active role in developing and implementing these solutions.

One of Change Toronto's initiatives, the Cooling Centre Project, is a partnership between Change Toronto and the City of Toronto which provides employment, training and leadership opportunities to a number of people with lived experience of homelessness through the operation of the City's cooling centres during extreme heat alerts.

While implementing the Cooling Centre Project, it was recognized that many people with personal experience of homelessness want to find work in the social service sector but often come up against any number of barriers. As such, Change Toronto set out to bring together stakeholders through a series of dialogue sessions to hear from multiple voices on the issue and explore solutions.

## Process

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Between December 2009 and March 2010, Change Toronto held 3 half-day focus groups with representatives of the social service sector including directors, frontline staff and service users who have an interest in finding work in the sector. Each of these sessions, facilitated by *Track Strategic Consultation and Implementation*, provided an opportunity to determine the challenges to hiring people with lived experience, potential solutions and actions that can be taken to create more inclusive organizations. Reports were prepared from each of these sessions.

In all, over 60 people from 20 organizations participated in these discussions. Organizations represented include:

- Habitat Services
- John Howard Society
- Accommodation Information & Support
- Breakaway
- Houselink
- Mainstay Housing
- Regeneration House
- COSTI
- Ontario Council of Alternative Businesses
- Ecuhome

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\* Throughout this report, the terms "people with lived experience" (PWLE), "peers", "community members" and "service users" will be used to refer to people who have been or currently are homeless.

- Youthlink Inner City
- Gerstein Centre
- Learning Enrichment Foundation
- Change Toronto
- St. Joseph's Health Centre
- Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre
- Fred Victor Centre
- Dream Team
- City of Toronto, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration

It is important to note that while the focus of this research is determining ways to improve opportunities for people with lived experience of homelessness, individuals from a diverse range of organizations (including those that do not directly address homelessness) were invited to participate in these sessions in order to gain knowledge from sectors that already have inclusive hiring policies.

A final event was held in March with 25 people who had participated in the previous discussions to determine specific actions that can be made to improve opportunities for service users seeking employment within the social service sector. At this session, participants were divided into small groups, and each group included at least one manager, frontline staff person and person with lived experience. These small groups then determined actions ranging from short term to long term for 10 strategies that had come from the previous focus groups.

The following report consolidates the information from each of the focus groups and highlights specific actions that can be taken to create more inclusive and representative organizations.

# Meaningful Employment

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Determining what meaningful employment means to people with lived experience of homelessness is an important aspect of understanding where changes need to be made in the sector. During the session with service users who are trying to find employment in the sector, the participants were asked to define meaningful employment.

## ***Meaningful and Gainful Employment:***

- *Improves your quality of life through proper compensation*
- *Feels good to do & is valued by others*
- *Allows you to make a contribution to society*
- *Allows for the opportunity to grow, learn and build relationships*
- *Has security & opportunity for advancement*
- *Is accessible & has flexibility in scheduling*

While expectations of work load and time commitments varied from person to person, whether individuals are looking for full time, part time or casual positions, having compensation that offers financial freedom and a living wage is essential. At the same time, having job security and opportunities for advancement is extremely important. Additionally, being part of a work place that provides flexibility and accessibility is very important, particularly for individuals with health issues. Having access to sick time, sick leave and time for medical appointments is very important to ensure the health of staff members.

Participants also stated that they feel a strong drive to work in positions that can allow them to give back to society, such as work in the social service sector. Participants noted that it is particularly important to “give back where they left off” by assisting people who are currently experiencing homelessness, poverty and marginalization in navigating the system and finding appropriate supports. In addition to giving back, respondents require employment that feels good to do,

is valued and is respected.

Central to finding meaningful employment is finding work that allows individuals to grow, learn and develop relationships. Participants stated that they want to find work that is mentally challenging, provides opportunities to learn and practice new skills, and develop new social networks.

## Barriers

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In each session, participants identified barriers they see for people with lived experience of homelessness when it comes to trying to find meaningful employment within the social service sector. The following barriers were identified:

### ***Promotion of Pre-employment Supports***

In order to find employment in any sector, there must be adequate pre-employment supports in place such as assistance with resume writing, practicing interview skills, access to showers, computers, professional clothing, training and more. While these supports do exist, for many PWLE it is often difficult to determine where to access the supports they need. Similarly, much of the training that is available for people is not necessarily training that matches their interests or goals for employment.

### ***Stigma***

Stigma plays a huge role in the ability for people with lived experience of homelessness to find work in the social service sector. Stigma leads to judgements, misconceptions and labels that make PWLE seem like high risk hires, creating reluctance among potential employers. PWLE are

*“People who work in the system tell us how courageous we are and how articulate we are about the issues and yet they don’t give us a chance to work with them.”*

often seen as more susceptible to addictions, mental health issues, sickness and not understanding professional boundaries and when applying for jobs in organizations where job seekers used to be service users, it is especially difficult to escape these labels. The social isolation that results from stigma also reduces a person’s access to opportunities and may make a person question their own ability to take on employment.

Stigma is not only related to the socio-economic circumstances of PWLE, but is also present when it comes to race and age. Many PWLE are older and have found this to be a barrier when applying for work. In many cases, young people and recent graduates are seen as safer choices, even if community members have the skills and experience needed to do the job. At the same time, there are a lot of training opportunities for youth, but much fewer for adults.

On the whole, PWLE see that organizations are not representative of the communities they work with and stigma is a major reason for this.

### ***Inaccessible Opportunities***

While the social service sector is a huge sector, it is very difficult to get into, especially for someone with a history of homelessness, poverty or marginalization. There are training opportunities available within the sector for students requiring practicums, however there are usually not training or entry level positions available to PWLE.

When PWLE do apply for positions in the sector, they are often at a disadvantage because personal and volunteer experience is not valued in the same way as formal education and recent work experience. Similarly, the isolation that often results from poverty and marginalization can reduce the number of connections that PWLE have within the sector, and finding employment is frequently based on who you know.

Many of these barriers to employment are based on “old school” hiring policies – things have always been done this way. With these policies engrained in organizations, the frequent rejection from employment within the sector can be extremely discouraging for PWLE, especially with the amount of unpaid time people put into organizations through volunteer work. This puts up a wall for PWLE, fosters disappointment and can turn people back to poverty, addictions and depression.

### **Organizational Culture**

The culture and operations of organizations create significant barriers for PWLE in finding employment within the sector. Organizations are dependent on funding and for this reason, many organizations compete with one another for resources. This competition creates the need to hire individuals who are seen as being low-risk and who can take on large work loads. Along with competition for resources, many organizations have boards of directors in which the majority of board members come from the corporate sector and do not understand the true value of hiring PWLE and do not hold the organization accountable for hiring community members.

This competition for resources partnered with the tendency for organizations to have corporate boards creates high levels of bureaucracy that are difficult for PWLE to navigate. When organizations do hire PWLE, it is often based on a charity model rather than equity. This creates clear differentiation between “regular staff” and “peers”. These distinctions can also impact levels of compensation, job security and the ability to fit in once in the workplace.

Organizational bureaucracy creates the perception - and in many cases reality - of hypocrisy and lack of accountability to the community served. For many organizations, community members play a limited, if any, role in the decision making processes of the organization.

*“I was working in a job in the sector when there was a disruption in the workplace. Myself and others were asked to wait out the disruption before returning to work. Then I had a disruption in my housing situation and wasn’t sleeping well. When we were called back to work I didn’t make it in on time because I hadn’t slept. I was told I didn’t have the ‘work ethic’ that was needed in the job. So it seems they could put me on hold but then not be flexible when I had some difficulty.”*

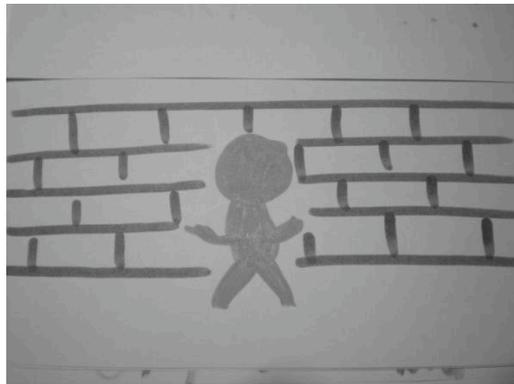
### **Social Assistance Regulations**

In each focus group, the issue of social assistance regulations was recognized as a significant barrier to PWLE in finding meaningful work. It is often difficult to find full time work in the social service sector, so when people on social assistance take on part time work, their earnings are clawed back from their social assistance. If someone on social assistance finds full time

employment and gets off of social assistance, their salary may not cover all of their new costs as rent will increase, the Ontario Child Benefit will be lost and assistance in covering medical costs will be lost. All of these additional costs happen at once, making the transition to work very difficult for someone coming off of social assistance, especially if they are not receiving a living wage that can support these new costs – putting people at risk of living below the poverty line. Many participants felt that even though these social assistance regulations create traps for people wanting to leave social assistance, there is very little political will to change these regulations.

### ***Compounding Barriers***

Each of these barriers in isolation can cause significant challenges when trying to find work in the sector, but for many community members, several or all of these barriers work against them at the same time. Overlapping barriers can make the job search next to impossible for many service users.



# Strategies and Actions

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The following 10 strategies and the corresponding actions came from the recommendations of focus group participants.

## 1. *Develop more inclusive organizational policies and practices*

### **Policy reviews and updates**

While most organizational policies exist to protect staff and community members, many policies create barriers for PWLE when trying to find employment within the sector. Policies can be reviewed and changed through the following recommendations:

- Organizations can conduct policy audits to review and update policies and determine which policies need to be changed to be more equitable.
- Community members can be involved in policy audits, since they will be aware of the policies that impact them the most.
- Organization staff must ensure collective agreements do not create barriers for PWLE.
- Community groups can conduct policy audits to review government policies to ensure they encourage inclusion.

## 2. *Value personal and lived experience*

### **Create full time positions**

While peer positions are a start, ensuring that PWLE have access to full time positions should be the ultimate goal.

- Organizations should ensure that PWLE are paid fairly and equitably, given benefits and recognized for their contributions to organizations.
- Organizations should ensure that new staff members who have health issues have access to flexible hours, sick time and sick leave.

### **Recognize volunteers**

Volunteers provide a lot to organizations and should be recognized for their efforts by:

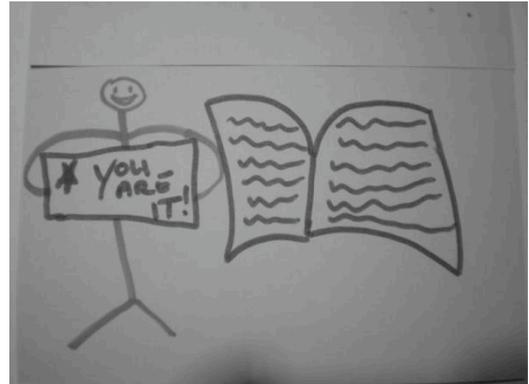
- Organizations can recognize the contributions of volunteers through honoraria and covering transportation costs, particularly for those sitting on boards and other decision-making bodies within an organization.
- Organizations should ensure that volunteer time counts toward an organizational credit when applying for work.

*“I participate in a lot of volunteer work. A wage isn’t everything but respect is.”*

## Changing hiring policies

Organizational hiring policies need to be changed to better reflect the community served. The following actions can be taken to create more inclusive hiring policies:

- Organizations can create policies stating that new positions are filled internally and ensure that internal positions are open to current staff as well as relief staff, peer workers, volunteers and service users.
- Organizations should share innovative policies and processes with other organizations.
- Organizations should ensure that job postings clearly state that volunteer and lived experience counts as experience and remove academic credentials as a mandatory requirement for employment whenever possible.
- Organizations can ensure that applicants are hired based on ability to empathise, understanding of the community, attitude and competency rather than formal education.
- When changes are made to hiring policies, staff need to be informed of the change to the hiring process to ensure they are aware that the process is still fair and transparent, just being made more accessible.
- Organizations can develop targeted or a percentage of positions for community members, while ensuring that these positions are full time, well paid and can lead to advancement within the organization.
- Organizations should evaluate interview process and questions to ensure this process is accessible to community members; this may include practical tests rather than overly formal interviews.



### 3. Support service-user led initiatives

#### Peer supports

People who have found work in the sector can support one another as well as those looking for work in the sector. Sharing evidence of success stories can have a positive impact on PWLE and organizations that are showing a reluctance to hire PWLE.

*"I was homeless, found a home and life changed. I volunteered and found work helping other consumer survivors. We can do anything we want, if we want it badly enough. It is possible."*

- Organizations can share success stories about their experiences hiring PWLE. This can go a long way in reducing stigma and changing hiring policies.
- Peer workers can develop a peer network within agencies and between agencies to provide an opportunity for PWLE to discuss their experiences working within organizations

- Peers who have found work in the sector can provide training for PWLE who would like to find work in the sector.
- Organizations can survey staff to determine the real number of people with lived experience. This can help to reduce the amount of stigma within an organization to show that much of the stigma that exists is false.
- Agency staff and management with lived experience can provide mentorship support to PWLE hired on as new staff.

### **Supporting community-led initiatives**

Social enterprises and community economic development projects provide work and training opportunities to community members. In order to better support social enterprises and community development:

- The City of Toronto and organizations throughout the city can establish policies requiring the use of social enterprises whenever possible.
- When organizations, community groups and government departments do use social enterprises, they can promote and “brag” about their support of community-led business.
- Organizations should find a way to support new PWLE-led initiatives whenever possible.
- Funders can provide targeted grants for community economic development projects that employ PWLE as leaders.

## **4. Address bureaucracy within organizations**

### **Ensure service users have a decision-making role**

When given the opportunity, community members can act as change agents within organizations and in turn can make organizations more inclusive, representative and responsive to the needs of the community. The following recommendations can be implemented to ensure community members are better engaged in decision-making process:

- Organizations can develop advisory groups to increase dialogue between staff and service users.
- Organizations can ensure PWLE sit on hiring committees.
- Individuals can hold agencies accountable for their practices by checking an organization’s practices against its mission and values.
- Community members can seek access to roles on an organization’s board of directors.
- Organizations can invite service users to participate in strategic planning exercises.
- Organizations can ensure that community members have an opportunity to work side-by-side with management to make sure they feel heard.

*“We have a role in all of this. We can’t wait for them to change their perceptions, we need to put ourselves out there and show them who we really are.”*

- Organizations can invite service users to have a role in program design.

### **Work with funders**

Funders play a huge role in the structure, programming and policies of organizations. In order to better engage funders and impact organizational policies:

- Community groups and individuals can encourage funders to require organizations to hold and report on policy audits.
- Funders can ensure they have PWLE participating in grant development and sitting on selection committees.
- Change Toronto can include funders in this conversation.
- Community groups and individuals can encourage funders to mandate that funded agencies hire a percentage of PWLE on staff and in training opportunities, have PWLE on the board and in other decision-making roles.
- Organizations can work with funders to develop consistent funder reporting and reduce the number of reports required each year.

## **5. Develop pre-employment supports**

### **Pre-employment**

Ensuring adequate pre-employment supports are in place is very important in assisting PWLE in finding employment.

- Organizations can work together to better promote supports such as job counselling, interview skills, resume development, life skills, time management, meal planning, clothing and showers.
- Government and organizations can ensure that employment supports are open and accessible and that community members do not feel they have to “beg” for support.

*“I was very fortunate to have a really good OW worker who helped me get the right kind of support and education. It led directly to my current employment where I have now been for several years.”*

### **Access to education and training**

Since so many jobs within the social service sector currently require academic credentials, it is important that PWLE gain increase access to academic programs.

- Universities and Colleges can develop more transparent and clearly worded applications.
- Universities and Colleges should review mandatory requirements for admission.
- Institutions and agencies providing training can link to employment apprenticeships.
- Organizations and community groups can work with Colleges and Universities to develop programming that meets the needs of PWLE, tied with job placements at the end.

- The private sector can assist in providing skills training and employment.
- Academic institutions and funders can increase the number of bursaries made available to PWLE to increase access to education.
- OW and ODSP can expand funding for formal training opportunities and expand on existing training opportunities to increase options.

## 6. *Create entry points and training for service users*

### **Increase entry points**

Getting a foot in the door can lead to full-time employment opportunities for individuals who would not normally have access to these opportunities.

- Organizations can establish short term volunteer placements to assist individuals in identifying and developing skills. These placements can be open to even the most marginalized community members.



- Change Toronto can work to centralize postings for peer, targeted and inclusive job postings.
  - Job fairs can be held specifically for PWLE who are trying to find work in the social service sector.
  - Organizations can establish internship programs for PWLE, similar to student positions, but ideally paid positions and with supports to find work following the internships.
  - Organizations can encourage PWLE to apply for relief positions.
- Organizations can work together to create rotating internships for PWLE to help people gain experience, increase skills and build networks.

## 7. *Develop supports for people once hired*

### **Supports once hired**

All new employees require supports once hired, however, these support requirements may be different for former service users or those transitioning from social assistance. In order to support new employees:

- Organizations should review supervision often to ensure adequate and appropriate support is provided and employees feel comfortable having a direct dialogue about their needs.
- Organizations must provide new employees with a well defined job description.
- Staff can work with new employees to identify career paths and individualised career plans.
- Organizations should provide new employees with 2 weeks of orientation rather than a ½ day.

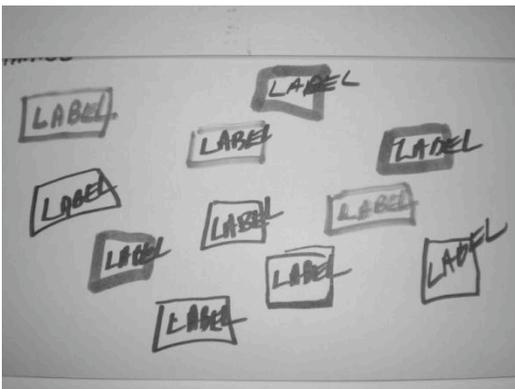
- Organizations can establish mentorships outside of traditional supervisory roles to support new employees in understanding the organizational culture, reducing exclusion and providing a sounding board.
- Organizations can create exceptions to the waiting periods for benefits.
- Organizations can ensure that wages will cover the cost of childcare, for those working in part-time or casual positions.
- Organizations must work with new employees to ensure their housing will not be jeopardized once they take on full time employment.

## 8. Address stigma

### Reduce embedded stigma within organizations

Stigma relating to homelessness, mental health challenges, poverty and marginalization can be found everywhere. While most people working in and with the social service sector are very aware of issues related to stigma, stigma still exists and education is needed to counter it. Stigma within organizations can be addressed by:

- Organization staff can receive regular anti-stigma, diversity and anti-oppression workshops and the dialogue around these issues should be incorporated into ongoing discussions such as staff meetings and forums.



- Organizations can increase opportunities for staff, management, board members and funders to interact with clients and see that clients are people, not statistics.
- Walk my Walk training can be developed for sector staff to provide experiential learning opportunities to better understand the challenges faced by community members.
- Organizations of all sizes should establish human rights committees.
- Everyone working in and with social service agencies, including board members, funders, government representatives, management and frontline staff should receive training on the value of hiring PWLE.
- PWLE can provide training and speak to agency staff, board members and funders about their experiences with homelessness and poverty.
- Toronto Hostels Training Centre can incorporate training led by PWLE about how organizations can reduce embedded stigma and better incorporate PWLE into staffing roles and in decision making.
- Staff can gain training on recovery and potential triggers for PWLE.

## Reduce stigma within society

In order to address social stigma, the general public needs to be made aware of the realities of homelessness and poverty. At the same time, more needs to be done to show that people with lived experience of homelessness and poverty are an important part of Toronto's diversity. The following actions can address social stigma:

- PWLE can provide public education through groups such as Voices From the Street and The Dream Team.
- The media can help to provide more of a public voice to PWLE and offer examples of the impacts of stigmatization and discrimination.
- PWLE can make presentations to schools of social work to educate future agency staff.
- PWLE can speak with unions to encourage them to change their advocacy toward supporting PWLE within organizations they are active with.
- Municipalities must eliminate discriminatory bylaws.
- Canada needs to develop a national housing policy.

## 9. Address barriers related to social assistance regulations

### Advocate for changes to social assistance

Social assistance regulations create a lot of barriers for PWLE in transitioning to employment. With the system as it currently is, many people feel as if they are being penalized for trying to find employment. In order to address this:

- Individuals and community groups can connect with The People's Blueprint – a community-led review of social assistance in Ontario.
- Academic institutions can conduct an economic study of the cost of clawbacks and other disincentives that make people fear finding employment.
- PWLE and community agencies can speak directly to government agencies about the challenges of social assistance regulations.

*"I invited a few people from a community organization over for dinner to have boiled potatoes, or roasted potatoes, or pasta without sauce or sauce without pasta. No one came. Funny that!"*

- Everyone can advocate that OW/ODSP stop clawing back people's income until they are earning a liveable wage.
- The government can help clarify and simplify the regulations related to gaining employment while on social assistance.
- Organizations can advocate for a longer transition for rate changes for rent geared to income housing.
- The government should raise the rates of social assistance.
- The government can ensure that people can leave social assistance by raising the minimum wage.

- Media can increase coverage of the true impact of clawbacks.

## 10. *Collectively continue this conversation*

### Keep this conversation going

Creating more opportunities for PWLE within the social service sector is going to take time and ongoing communication is essential in maintaining momentum. The following actions can be implemented to build on this conversation:

- Everyone who has participated in the discussion can continue to bring these issues up with organization staff, management and boards.
- Change Toronto can develop a newsletter and online network to assist in sharing resources, sharing success stories and getting other organizations involved.
- Change Toronto will host networking events to discuss specific actions that can be taken by organizations and to report back on progress.
- Media can assist in promoting the benefits of peer-involvement initiatives.
- Organizations can hold open houses to share resources, information about programming and increase dialogue between organizations throughout the city.
- Organizations can set targets and report back on progress at quarterly follow-up events.
- Organizations can share relevant programs and policies.
- Organizations should include human resources staff in this conversation.
- Organizations can incorporate targets into strategic plans.
- Everyone can learn from organizations already doing this work, including other areas of the sector such as organizations focused on addictions and violence against women.
- Change Toronto and community organizations can develop educational tools and a how-to manual to assist organizations in effectively hiring community members.

*"It's time for new ideas."*

### Connect to advocacy that already exists

Many networks already exist throughout the city that can both provide input and promote this conversation. Change Toronto will connect with the following groups:

- 25 in 5
- Voices From the Street
- Ontario Human Rights Commission
- Seeds of Hope
- The PWLE Caucus for the Mental Health Commission of Canada's At Home/Chez Soi Toronto site demonstration project
- The Dream Team
- The People's Blueprint

## **Examples of Promising Practices**

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The following are examples of promising practices and policies that were raised throughout the course of the focus groups. This is not an exhaustive list of examples, but simply provides an overview of some of the promising practices that currently exist throughout the city.

### ***Better including service users:***

- Houselink includes community members on hiring committees.
- When jobs become available at the Learning Enrichment Foundation (LEF), all jobs are posted internally first. At LEF, “internal” includes not only current staff, but also volunteers and clients.
- St. Michael’s Hospital has a program called Equating Experts by Experience (EBE’s).

### ***Peer supports and peer positions:***

- Unusual Suspects is a group of CAMH staff with personal experience of mental health issues or addictions who meet on a regular basis.
- Fred Victor Centre hires peers for positions at Friends’ Restaurant and Catering. Peers are also hired to work with drop-in programs such as the art group, mental health and justice and the garden group.
- YouthLink Inner City hires four part time Peer Educators for five month placements and one full time Advanced Peer Educator for a one year contract. Peer Educators work to engage street involved youth in the community, through work at the drop-in, educational workshops and street outreach. Peer Educators also get training, support in attaining personal goals and assistance in developing transferable life and work skills.
- Dream Team hires consumer/survivors as peer advocates to speak publicly about the importance of supportive housing.
- Regeneration House hires clients in reception and cleaning positions.
- Accommodation, Information and Support hires community members as social recreation assistants, message takers and building health promoters.

### ***Social enterprises hiring service users or consumer/survivors:***

- Gateway Linens – An industrial laundry facility hiring and training residents of Salvation Army Gateway shelter. Placements are 6 months, then participants are assisted in finding work in the field.
- Phoenix Print Shop runs Foundations in Print, an employment and training program for homeless youth. Placements provide training in the print industry. Once placements are complete, participants are supported in finding long term work opportunities in the industry.
- Fresh Start – A cleaning company providing full and part time work to psychiatric survivors.

- A-Way Express – A courier service founded and staffed by survivors of mental health challenges.
- Silver Brush – A painting service hiring psychiatric consumer/survivors who are at risk of homelessness. A partnership between Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre and Houselink.
- Raging Spoon – A catering company and café staffed and operated by consumer/survivors.

### ***Addressing bureaucracy:***

- Regeneration House, Houselink and PARC ensure that community members are active members of the Board of Directors.

### ***Pre-employment supports:***

- Dress for Success provides professional clothing and career development supports to women looking for work.
- The Learning Enrichment Foundation and Fort York provide clothing and pre-employment supports.
- Simplicious is a practice firm where people needing recent work experience work in a simulated office environment while also receiving job coaching supports.

### ***Education and training programs:***

- Ryerson University has established a training program for people with foreign credentials related to social work. Once the program is complete, participants are supported in finding relief positions within social service agencies.
- The Learning Enrichment Foundation offers a wide range of training options that go beyond the traditional training programs available to recipients of Ontario Works.

### ***Increasing entry points for service users:***

- North York Housing Help (COSTI) has a volunteer/mentorship program to help immigrant and refugee women in gaining employment skills within a non-profit environment. Mentees gain valuable training and work related skills, while also working with COSTI staff to develop career plans.
- The Gerstein Centre has developed a supported internship program for service users and new Canadians with foreign credentials.

### ***Providing supports to new staff members:***

- When Houselink hires members for full time positions within the organization, new staff members are supported in attaining housing outside of Houselink.

- LEF makes training and supports such as ESL, computer training and mentoring available to all staff.

***Addressing issues of stigma among staff:***

- Habitat Services educates staff on diversity, mental health, addictions and the value of lived experience.

## **Next Steps**

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The Employing People With Lived Experience of Homelessness Working Group has been formed by those who were interested in doing more following the focus groups. Over the upcoming months, Change Toronto and the Employing People With Lived Experience of Homelessness Working Group will be working to develop an action plan and begin moving forward with some of actions listed in this document.

Change Toronto will continue to work with key stakeholders, hold learning events to address some of the major challenges listed throughout this document and highlight innovative solutions that are currently being implemented. A follow-up event will also be held to report back on steps that have been taken by the organizations that have participated in these discussions.

## Appendix A: Focus Group Findings – December 1, 2009

### Dialogue with Managers and Executives from the Social Service Sector

*December 1, 2009*

*College Street United Church*

Hosted by: Change Toronto

Facilitated by: Track Strategic Consultation & Implementation

### **Barriers to Gainful Employment Opportunities**

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Participants identified two significant barriers that block opportunities for PWLE of homelessness to secure gainful employment in the community sector: the policies and practices of the income support system; and, the culture and operations of the social services sector. Almost all other challenges are seen to flow from or be interrelated to these two.

#### ***Policies & Practices of the Income Support Systems***

The legislation and policies that govern OW and ODSP support can be very limiting and can create blocks to gainful employment.

For example, if someone has an opportunity to generate income it is deducted from the income support, leaving the person no further ahead. Additionally, if someone on income support does find a job, the salary may not be sufficient to cover necessities that are essential to fulfilling the job requirements such as travel, childcare or clothing.

**In the end, working could actually cost a person more than not working.**

Tangential to this is the issue of housing. The reality is that employment security is at risk if someone does not have stable, safe, affordable housing and because of rent-geared to income calculations, this kind of housing is not always easy to secure when you are employed (never mind when you are not!).

A person with employment, but not making a high enough salary, may end up using the vast majority of their income to afford decent accommodation—leaving little for other essentials such as food.

Someone may be able to find “cheap” housing that they can pay for with a relatively low salary but more often than not this means sacrificing security, stability and even one’s health.

**If secure, affordable housing is not readily available, then having a job may not lead to a better quality of life.**

### ***Culture & Operations of the Social Services Sector***

Some of the internal dynamics of the social service sector itself can create barriers to PWLE of homelessness accessing employment.

For example, the non-profit sector is not immune to the effects of the free market system and when resources are scarce—as they often are—competition between agencies for funding and support increases.

**In this environment of scarcity and competition, agencies are put in a position of making so-called “low risk” hiring choices—a choice that is often made to the exclusion of someone who has experienced homelessness and may require “extra support”.**

Community organizations can also be constrained by corporate boards that may not understand the value of hiring those with experience of homelessness, and by “closed shops” or other HR policies and practices, such as the expectation for potential candidates to have certain educational credentials or criminal reference checks.

When someone with experience of homelessness is hired it is sometimes done within the “charity” framework instead of one of “empowerment”, and frequently the jobs are low paying or below market value.

**Holding this all in place are deep running perceptions and misconceptions about people with experience of homelessness, and what appears to be little motivation to make the necessary changes.**

Exacerbating the challenges within the sector is the overall lack of entry points into the sector workforce. Without changes made elsewhere, such as in the educational system, any skill and knowledge training required might not be accessible to those who don’t currently have ‘credentials’ or the funds to cover the training costs.

## **Strategies to Address the Barriers**

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So what can be done in our agencies and communities to overcome the identified barriers and make it easier for people who have experienced homelessness firsthand to secure fulfilling work in the community service sector?

Some organizations have already taken steps in this direction. For example,

- Houselink, which provides supportive housing to people living with mental illness, hires people living in their housing. When the staff are ready to take the next step, Houselink partners with external resource to help with the transition.
- North York Housing Help (COSTI) has a mentorship program that helps people with individualized plans for their careers. COSTI also hires a lot of clients and counts time at the drop-in as experience in addition to providing extensive paid training.
- AIS hires social recreation assistants, message takers and health building promoters to support their peers.
- Youth Link operates a peer program that includes the staffing of a peer educator.
- The Gerstein Centre has a project that supports people with foreign credentials to secure work in the sector through training and relief work positions. This is a good model to learn from to support PWLE of homelessness.

To take these efforts to the next level and to begin to make changes in the sector that will generate more employment opportunities for PWLE of homelessness, participants developed the following 5 strategies with consideration of the identified barriers.

### ***Learn From and Support Organizations Already Doing it***

One of the quickest ways to begin making an impact is to proactively support organizations that are already employing people with lived experience of homelessness. This might be through partnering with organizations like Change Toronto that seeks placement opportunities for participants of their Cooling Centre Employment Project; or it might be through supporting social purpose enterprises that give PWLE an opportunity to work. There is also a great deal to be learned from other areas of the sector as well. For example, agencies serving immigrants and refugees have a history of hiring those who have used their services.

### ***Create Entry Points, Skills Development & Placements Through Partnerships and Activities The Make Employment Opportunities More Easily Attainable by PWLE of Homelessness***

Creating collaborative learning and training opportunities, especially with educational institutions, is seen as a meaningful way of shifting the terrain and opening up doors for people seeking employment. For example, a college or university could partner with community agencies or groups to create a practical training program, or organizations can partner to support each other's efforts by offering placements in their respective locations. Job fairs sponsored by non-profit

organizations can also provide both a chance to engage the sector and a valuable way for people to explore and find job opportunities.

### ***Provide Facts and Education to Sector Leaders and Decision Makers***

Developing and delivering awareness and educational training to senior staff and boards of organizations is one way to incite changes in organizational culture. Broader sector-wide awareness campaigns are also an option as are continuing cross-agency learning and communication on the subject.

### ***Change Policy and Practice to be More Open & Accommodating to Hiring PWLE***

Ultimately, changes to organizational policy and practice need to be made within organizations for the opportunities to become real. Several actions can be taken in this regard, including:

- Creating a continuum of part-time and full-time work as opportunities for PWLE—ex. Target some jobs for PWLE and make an employment program to overcome the “closed shop”
- “Problematizing” the term peer support
- Hiring consultants who are PWLE to work with boards and management teams.
- Carrying out policy audit analysis of “true risk”
- Electing officials with lived experience
- Figuring out ways to pay PWLE who are volunteering
- Developing accommodations for PWLE in the workplace
- Developing hiring practices based on skills and experience not formal credentials
- Advocating within agencies re: embedded stigma
- Ensuring there is equity in wages and benefits
- Creating internal standards (ex. Budget allocation)
- Producing internships linked to job placement
- Supporting and building on peer opportunities

### ***Encourage Funders to Require or Reward Organizations that Hire PWLE of Homelessness***

A potentially longer-term strategy, but one with a very high degree of impact, is influencing funders to institute requirements or conditions for organizations to create employment opportunities for PWLE of homelessness, and rewarding those who have positive policies and practices already in place.

## Where to Begin

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It was suggested that some of the main activities that agencies could start on right away include:

- Continuing to network
- Creating collaborative projects
- Sharing relevant programs and policies with one another

And, that Change Toronto might consider:

- Reaching out to organizations not normally at this table
- Keeping communication flowing and these groups connected
- Providing educational tools or workshops for boards and upper management
- Coordinating a “how to” manual
- “Working” the funder angle
- Developing research on the real value that PWLE of homelessness bring to an organization.

## Keys to Success

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The longer-term vision for the group is ultimately about breaking barriers, shifting organizational cultures, and “erasing” the differentiation between PWLE and “other staff”. To bring this all together successfully, participants strongly recommend developing a broad strategy involving multiple stakeholders and including, for example, admin and HR staff of organizations.

It would also be very valuable to take the time to learn from other parts of the non-profit sector that have gone through a similar shift of either moving towards or away from the practice of hiring people from the community served. Examples of this can be found with those who work in addictions or with women experiencing violence.

Finally, throughout the process it is critical to acknowledge and consider the multiple pathways, interests and uniqueness of people with lived experience of homelessness.

## Appendix B: Focus Group Findings – January 20, 2010

### Dialogue with Front Line Staff from the Social Service Sector

*January 20, 2010*

*College Street United Church*

Hosted by: Change Toronto

Facilitated by: Track Strategic Consultation & Implementation

### Barriers to Gainful Employment Opportunities

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Participants identified the barriers that block opportunities for PWLE of homelessness to secure gainful employment in the community sector.

**OLD SCHOOL HIRING PRACTICES, LACK OF WORK EXPERIENCE & CULTURAL BARRIERS** priority gets placed on academic experience not lived experience, and barriers go up if someone doesn't have paid experience or Canadian experience and accreditation.

**INADEQUATE PRE-EMPLOYMENT & EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES** that can lead to meaningful and rewarding employment

**LACK OF RESOURCES TO MEET BASIC EMPLOYMENT NEEDS** such as showers, clothing, shoes, transportation, dental care, upgrading skills

**STIGMA & ISOLATION** mental health issues lead to self isolation and lack of motivation

**OVERCOMING JUGEMENTS OF PERSONAL SITUATIONS** such as employer and self-perception of those with criminal records

**CAUGHT IN MIDDLE WHEN USERS GET JOBS** once hired the person is viewed differently by other users & staff

**COVERT SCREENING OF APPLICANTS & RELUCTANCE TO HIRE** employers advertise as equal opportunity employers but don't give second interviews as organizations aren't sure if the person can do the job.

It was noted that the overlapping barriers compound the issues and make it especially challenging to make headway. Some of the areas where a difference might be made more easily include: changing hiring practices; creating more or improved places where people can get showers and clothing; and, forging pathways to employment that people are actually interested in.

## **Strategies to Address the Barriers**

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So what can be done in our agencies and communities to overcome the identified barriers and make it easier for people who have experienced homelessness first hand to secure fulfilling work in the community service sector?

The following strategies, that were generated from the input of participants, begin to draw out a road map for overcoming the challenges and opening up pathways to employment in the sector.

### ***Providing Pre-Employment Supports***

Before the employment opportunity even begins, PWLE may need some pre-employment supports such as access to clothing for the workplace or pre-employment support groups. Some of these kinds of supports are currently found at organizations such as Fort York and the Learning Enrichment Foundation (with Windfall). Other programs such as “Up with Women” or “Dress for Success” also are in operation.

### ***Including Community Members in the Dialogue & Decision Making***

It is important to provide genuine opportunities for PWLE to have meaningful participation in the dialogue and decision-making of an organization. Hiring policies and practices can begin to shift and open up when the presence and voice of those seeking employment are at the table. Some of the ways that organizations can do this include: having members help review the hiring practices and sit on the hiring committee; having members represented on the board or directors or other decision making bodies; and having members involved in program design and strategic planning. A few of the organizations already practicing this include: Regeneration House and Houselink.

### ***Creating Positions at the Agency***

Intentionally creating flexible, entry point positions within the organization that provide employment to community members is a key way to open up the work environment to those seeking employment. For example, organizations could create positions from reception to casual labour to social recreation assistants. This will require a change towards ‘targeted hiring’ and expanding the definition of ‘hiring from within’ to include community members. Agencies that have good examples of this are: Houselink, Regeneration House, CAMH and AIS.

### ***Valuing Experience Over Formal Education***

For agencies that are open to rewriting their hiring policies, one option is to shift from an emphasis on formal education to valuing other life experiences and volunteering. For example, lessons could be learned from St. Michael’s Hospital where they have a program called Equating EBE’s (Experts by Experience).

### ***Supporting Training Opportunities***

While creating positions within the organization is pivotal, supporting the professional development of PWLE to enter the positions or to move up, is also very important. Some ways this could be done include: subsidizing TDSB continuing education courses; developing bursaries for education; creating “practice firms” such as the “Simplicious” practice firm operated by Job Skills; bridging programs for school (competency model vs academic); and helping people find alternative options to OSAP.

### ***Developing Pathways to Employment That Community Members are Actually Interested In***

To respect the diversity of interests and aspirations that PWLE may have, it is of value to consider creating positions or skills development opportunities that are of real interest to those who might apply. For example not everyone is interested in cooking but instead may want to learn accounting. The Learning Enrichment Foundation is one organization that has some experience with this practice.

### ***Forming Peer Support Initiatives***

Peer support initiatives are one more way to create pathways to gainful employment for PWLE. These could take the form of peer education programs or peer advocacy services that provide community members with an opportunity to exercise their skills in the workplace. What is essential in the creation of these positions is that the “peer workers” are given the same status as “other staff” and that these positions are not token. One way of handling this might be to use different terminology to break the limiting associations people may have with the term ‘peer’. Organizations that have peer support positions and programs include: Regeneration House, CAMH, CMHA, Fred Victor Centre, Youth Link and the Dream Team.

### ***Providing Necessary Supports Once in the Employ of the Agency***

Once in the employ of the organization, PWLE may need ongoing support to ensure the transition works smoothly and that they are given an opportunity to develop their capacity. This could include supports such as language training, professional development, or mentoring and supportive supervision. The Learning Enrichment Foundation is an organization that strives to provide these kinds of supports.

### ***Creating A Positive Work Environment***

Surrounding the newly hired person with a welcoming and positive environment is essential to the success of the employment experience for everyone. To achieve this, some organizations may need to take steps to educate their staff, board and volunteers or even other stakeholders such as private landlords. Topic could include: anti-oppression, diversity and cross-cultural sensitivity, mental health and addictions, and, of course, the value of having lived experience of homelessness. This type of education may also affect the way in which the employer interprets

personal histories such criminal record checks. Habitat Services is one organization that has made efforts to educate their staff on these kinds of issues.

### ***Launching Social Enterprises***

In recent years Social Enterprise have been gaining in popularity as both an alternative method of generating revenue for a social purpose and as a means of creating employment for community members. If done well these can provide meaningful and fulfilling employment opportunities for PWLE. Some social enterprises in Toronto include: Fresh Start, A-way, Silver Brush and Raging Spoon.

## **Where To Begin**

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Key to the strategies being successful is starting at the pre-employment stage for both the individual and the organization. For the individual, having some of the basic supports in place before beginning the employment training or application will set them up for greater success. For the organizations, spending time revising hiring practices, putting supports in place and educating their staff, will create an environment that is welcoming and ready to successfully embrace PWLE as valued members of the staff compliment.

Participants indicated that some of the activities that would be helpful to have Change Toronto leading include:

- Identifying and sharing what supports already exist
- Educating and training government, employers, and organizations about the VALUE of hiring PWLE
- Making useful recommendations about short-term gains that are not difficult for organizations to implement
- Celebrating “who we are” so PWLE are seen as part of the whole.

## Appendix C: Focus Group Findings – February 10, 2010

### Dialogue with People With Lived Experience of Homelessness

*February 10, 2010*

*College Street United Church*

Hosted by: Change Toronto

Facilitated by: Track Strategic Consultation & Implementation

### Participants

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Change Toronto invited people who have lived experience of homelessness and who either have experience seeking employment in the non-profit sector or would like to find employment in the sector. 19 individuals were in attendance.

### Meaningful & Gainful Employment

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To better understand the range of meaningful and gainful employment, participants were asked to identify and discuss what it means from their perspective. The following summarizes the outcomes of that dialogue.

For the group, meaningful and gainful employment:

#### ***Improves Your Quality of Life Through Proper Compensation***

Key to meaningful employment is proper compensation that provides financial freedom and the opportunity to permanently get off of social assistance. For the most part this means having full time employment with benefits and being paid “living wages” that are competitive and in line with the general marketplace.

#### ***Feels Good To Do & Is Valued By Others***

While proper compensation is foundational to meaningful employment, it is also important that one feels good about the work they are doing, that they are respected and that their efforts are valued by others. Being in a work environment where there are equitable employment practices and where you enjoy the people you work with contribute to a positive work experience.

### ***Allows You To Make A Contribution to Society***

For many who have received support when they were in need, having a job where they can give back to others and to the community is important. “Doing one’s bit for society” and “giving back where one left off” are core values that when applied to work, make it all that much more meaningful.

### ***Allows For The Opportunity To Grow, Learn & Build Relationships***

Employment that helps you “grow as a human being”, is mentally challenging, and provides you with an opportunity to learn new skills adds significant value to the work experience. Additionally, being in a workplace where one can connect with others and build social relationships elevates one’s spirit and promotes social inclusion.

### ***Has Security & Opportunity For Advancement***

While having a well paying job that you enjoy and through which you can give back to the community is highly desirable and meaningful, it is just as important that the job is secure and that there are opportunities to develop and advance. Secure employment and a chance for advancement creates favorable conditions for someone who is re-entering the workforce to regain stability in their life.

### ***Is Accessible & Has Flexibility In Scheduling***

Working in an environment that is both physically accessible and has flexible scheduling is imperative to work being meaningful, especially but not exclusively, for people living with health challenges or who are consumer survivors. Being able to attend medical appointments or have sick time and sick leave options without unnecessarily harsh penalty allows people the opportunity to maintain employment instead of relying on social assistance.

## **Barriers To Meaningful & Gainful Employment Opportunities**

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Participants identified the major barriers that they feel block opportunities for PWLE of homelessness to secure gainful employment in the community sector.

### ***Stigma & Discrimination***

When applying for work, many people with lived experience of homelessness often come up against the stigma of mental health and addictions. Because of the stigma, employers arbitrarily assign ‘labels’ to the individual or their situation and may be reluctant to hire the person when, for example, they learn that they are on medication. Concurrently, people with lived experience of homelessness may also face discrimination based on race and age. It is the experience of participants that the staff in the social service sector are not reflective of the diversity in the community served, and that this does not help when it comes to implementing diverse hiring

practices. Age discrimination is not only apparent in the hiring process, but it seems that there are many job creation programs for youth but not for adults. Possibly, as one participant noted: “because it may be easier to do”.

### ***Transition To Work Trap & Claw Backs***

When someone is on social assistance (OW/ODSP) “just getting a job” to improve one’s quality of life is not as straightforward as it seems. On social assistance there are some supports such as medication and the opportunity to apply to live in supportive housing. Once employed and off of assistance, these supports disappear and one’s cost of living can skyrocket—especially because they would then be paying market rent—leaving the person even further below the poverty line than when they were on assistance. For those who try to get work experience through part-time work, their social assistance is clawed back, preventing them from ever getting the ‘leg up’ they need to enter the workforce successfully.

### ***Hypocrisy, Bureaucracy and Lack of Accountability In Sector***

When seeking work within the social services sector, people with lived experience of homelessness often encounter staff that, despite the values they claim to work by, don’t “practice what they preach”. Some participants have met staff that give the impression that they think PWLE “could never do the job that staff do”. It is also the observation of many PWLE that there is “too much bureaucracy and not enough accountability” and that organization staff “hide behind piles of paper” when it comes to matters like hiring practices in organizations. For example, while some organizations claim to be open to hiring PWLE or consumer survivors, they rarely do. This “hypocrisy, bureaucracy and lack of accountability” in organizations puts up a wall for PWLE, fosters disappointment and can turn them back to poverty, addictions and depression.

### ***Overvaluing Formal Education and Personal Connections & Not Valuing Personal Experience***

Many people with lived experience of homelessness have not had the opportunity to receive formal education such as university or college degrees. This creates barriers to securing employment, as most jobs require high school or post-secondary of education.

The personal or volunteer experience that PWLE may have is not valued in the same way. When employers do advertise positions specifically for PWLE, it is the people who do have formal or advanced education that are “cherry picked” for the jobs. Securing these jobs is made equally difficult when people are chosen for positions because of their personal connections. This puts many people living on low income, especially those who may be socially isolated, at an additional disadvantage.

Overall it was noticed that the social assistance system itself creates cycles of poverty that are sustained by keeping people on social assistance rather than enabling them to progress beyond the need for support. Additionally, when there is no political will at the organizational level to change hiring practices things continue to stay the same.

Furthermore, it is frustrating for PWLE of homelessness to hear about job openings in the sector that are inaccessible to them. This is especially true after they have put in so much unpaid time and energy volunteering in the sector and gaining hands on experience only to find that this experience is not seen as having value in a paid position.

## **Strategies to Address The Barriers**

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So what can be done in our agencies and communities to overcome the identified barriers and make it easier for people who have experienced homelessness first hand to secure fulfilling work in the community service sector?

The following strategies generated by participants begin to draw out a road map for overcoming the challenges and opening up pathways to employment in the sector.

### ***Providing More Training Opportunities***

Having more training opportunities that are geared to opening up pathways to employment is a vital part of the process for PWLE to secure meaningful and gainful work.

### ***Advocate For Policy & System Change***

Progressive changes in government policies and legislation that currently penalize people who are trying to transition from social assistance to employment would have a broad impact for many people with lived experience of homelessness. Working together to advocate for policy and legislative change, such as removing claw backs and increasing the minimum wage, is a strategy well worth the effort.

### ***Address Stigma and Prejudice By Educating People Working in the Sector***

One of the ways that stigma and prejudice can be addressed in the community sector is through training workshops for those who are delivering services. Led by PWLE, these “walk my walk” learning events would help those working in the system to see PWLE and consumer survivors as individuals and not statistics, and would help build greater understanding and sensitivity amongst staff.

### ***Hold Agencies Accountable***

For employment opportunities to open up in the social service sector, organizations will inevitably need to be more accountable for their practices and the environment they create. One way to do this is for PWLE to be involved in developing the strategic directions of the organization and to encourage organizations to check their practices against their mission and values.

### ***Take Personal Responsibility***

While there are organizational and governmental changes that need to be made and while more training options are helpful, participants of this session emphasized the importance of personal responsibility. From this perspective, people with lived experience of homelessness have to show that they want to work and are capable of doing the work. Starting new organizations or projects is seen as another way to take personal responsibility and create employment.

## **Where To Begin**

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Participants recommend that it is time to generate new ideas to address these issues. Current methods of opening up entry points to employment in the social services sector such as ‘peer support jobs’ are a limited solution, and in some cases can actually create tensions for people.

To facilitate change in the sector, the group suggests that Change Toronto and supporters could take up some of the following activities:

- Bring awareness of the issues to the Change Toronto network.
- Create and deliver peer-led “walk my walk” workshops for those delivering services.
- Help give voice to PWLE in the public and media.
- Coordinate opportunities for everyone to keep talking as a group.

# **Change Toronto**

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