

GUIDED



**FOR PEERS
IN HOUSING SUPPORT**

The Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership Project Erasmus+ “Training for Housing Support Workers” in short “TrainHouse” united organisations working with homeless people in the Czech Republic, Finland, Hungary, Spain and the United Kingdom. The project aimed to develop training materials to be used by professional staff, peer support workers and volunteers in supporting homeless people on their way to independent housing. Between 2016 and 2018, the six partners exchanged good practices on supporting homeless people into housing.

For the purposes of the guide, the term ‘housing’ is defined loosely: in some countries, accommodation services (like temporary hostels) offer studio apartments, often with private bathroom and kitchen(ette) facilities, while in others the focus was more on independent housing, whether shared by several people, used by one single person or even a family with children. In all scenarios, the homeless people received additional support to help maintain their tenancies by professional staff, peers and volunteers.

To see how housing support is defined by the authors, click [here](#)

INTRODUCTION OF THE ORGANISATIONS

Arrels Foundation, Spain

For 30 years, Arrels Foundation has been providing support to the people who sleep on the streets of Barcelona and it also works on raising awareness and transforming lives and helping to end homelessness. To make it possible, throughout all these years it has launched different projects and services thanks to a great team of volunteers and professionals.

Over the last few years, the Foundation has promoted the participation of people who have lived on the street, and it is now working on the possibility of introducing a peer role in the Individual Support teams. These are the teams in charge of providing a long-term, intensive and longitudinal case monitoring for people who have slept rough for many years and now live in a permanent housing unit in accordance with the Housing First model.

For more information about the organisation click [here](#)



Arrels



BMSZKI, Hungary

BMSZKI

Budapesti Módszertani
Szociális Központ
és Intézményei



BMSZKI is the biggest homeless service provider in Budapest, Hungary, with a wide range of services, from outreach to day centres, medical services, shelters and temporary

accommodation for men, women, couples as well as families with children. In addition to these, housing support programs have been implemented for people who are engaged to cooperate with our support team after moving to independent housing. BMSZKI is launching a housing-first light pilot in the fall of 2018, involving 25 rough sleepers.

For more information about the organisation click [here](#)

Menhely Alapítvány (Shelter Foundation), Hungary

Menhely



Founded 30 years ago, Menhely Alapítvány provides a wide range of social support and services to homeless individuals and families in Budapest, fostering cooperation among various units of society. Their team consists of volunteers, professionals and peer volunteers.

In addition to the services they operate their street paper called Fedél Nélkül ('Without a Roof') along with art competitions and community social work. Members of the public buy the street magazine from our distributors, which helps to fund and keep better accommodation. With the conscious help of the coordinators, the residents then formulate a self-helping and self-controlling smaller group. Their activity has developed in the last 5 years to support each other and the broader distributor group as peers, the club operates as place of exchange of experiences replacing the missing relations in one's life.

Peer work is also involved in their public sensitizing program called 'First Hand About Homelessness' where Experts by Experience keep a dialogue about the topic in various forms, as Homeless City Tours, Irregular Class Discussions, Living Libraries etc. Their job has been made mostly voluntarily and the trainings for new members are held by the more experienced ones.

In the last 3 years they have also welcomed peer employees in new roles with the aim to give sheltered job opportunities leading individuals back to the real job market and, at the same time, helping to free the professional staff to do quality social work in our institutional services.

For more information about the organisation click [here](#)

Platforma pro Sociální Bydlení (The Czech Platform for Social Housing), Czech Republic

Platform for Social Housing is an umbrella organisation that unites 79 members - service providers, experts in the field of social housing and people in housing need, advocating for a Social Housing Bill that would end homelessness in the Czech Republic. One of the members of the Platform, IQ Roma Service has specific experience and training in housing stability support services based on Housing First principles.

**Platforma
pro sociální
bydlení**

Platforma

From the very origin Platform for Social Housing has been keen on involving experts by experience to have their say in formulating the policy priorities of the organisation and consulting the strategic documents. People in housing need have been active in Social Housing Bill consultations, local housing policy priorities in several municipalities or at public hearings and press conferences organised by the Platform. IQ Roma Service employs peer consultants in their effort to rehouse and stabilise homeless families in the pilot Housing First programme in the Czech Republic.

For more information about the organisation click [here](#)

St Mungo's, UK

Established in 1969 St Mungo's is a Homelessness charity working with people across the South of England.

St Mungo's provides support and services to people who are homeless or at risk

of becoming homeless through outreach, hostels, supported housing and Housing First models as well as access to recovery, education, training and employment.

St Mungo's employs 1200 staff to support 2,700 clients across 350 services.

In 2008, St Mungo's began a training scheme to help 12 clients develop skills and knowledge to become project and housing workers in the homelessness sector. In 2009, this training scheme became an accredited apprenticeship with Health and Social Care qualifications attached to each job role.

The St Mungo's Apprentice Scheme has now trained over 200 people who have lived experience of being homeless, sleeping rough, substance and problematic alcohol use, mental health and / or criminal justice services.

For more information about the organisation click [here](#)

St Mungo's
Ending homelessness
Rebuilding lives

St Mungo's



Vva ry



Vva ry is an NGO founded in 1986 by homeless people themselves. The organisation is not committed to any political parties' or religious communities' agenda, but aims to influence Finnish housing policies together with other stakeholders. The aim of the organisation is to eradicate shelters and make it possible for everyone to live in their own apartment.

The organisation has a long history of participation and peer support work by the homeless people. The organisation was solely run on a voluntary basis for the first 10 years. Our first paid employee was a former homeless person, who was in charge of running a woodwork workshop where carpentry skills were transferred from a master to apprentices. Participation of people who have experience in homelessness forms the organisation's guiding principle, which permeates every level of its actions ranging from peer work to administration.

Today Vva ry has around 40 employees of whom 25 percent have experienced homelessness themselves. We run two housing units (following the Housing First model) which have all together 100 apartments. The support provided to the residents of the units is tailored according to the individual needs of every resident. No Fixed Abode has a night center, a peer support and volunteering center, an outreach team working at night time, housing counselling and floating support, support for scattered housing, specialisation in homeless immigrants' issues, and a summer villa run by the peers.

For more information about the organisation click [here](#)

	Traditional services	Supported Housing	Housing First	Rapid Rehousing	Volunteers	Peer Support
Arrels (ES)	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
BMSZKI (HU)	✓	✓				
Menhely (HU)	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Platforma (CZ)			✓	✓		✓
St Mungo's (UK)	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Vva ry (FI)	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓

This Guide for Peer Support Workers contains a summary of the common lessons learnt in the project. We hope that other services supporting homeless people into independent living can use this brochure to get new tips and ideas on how to provide help more efficiently, or more creatively.

For the Volunteer Guide, click [here](#)

For the Professional Guide, click [here](#)



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INTRODUCTION

Guide

INTRODUCTION

What do we mean by peer support in the homelessness sector?

Using peer support specifically in housing programs and ending homelessness is a relatively new concept. Peer support was and is mainly used in housing programs for people suffering from mental illness and/or addiction, which builds on previous experiences. This is more about the continuation of support in coping with the primary problem of mental illness and drug addiction in a subsequent housing program. Peer support in housing programs aimed at families with children, low-income groups, elderly people, young people leaving institutional care facilities or prisoners is still in the beginning phases.

According to [FEANTSA](#) (an European wide NGO focusing exclusively on the fight against homelessness), peer support is a supportive relationship between people who have their lived experience in common. Among homeless people, the experience individuals have in common is homelessness. A peer support relationship can take different forms, as can a peer support role. Peer support can be formally organised by the paid staff of a homelessness organisation, or be structured more informally by clients themselves. What formally organised or informally organised peer support systems have in common is that at least one element of the support that clients receive is provided by other people with lived experience of homelessness.

Housing support programs and ending homelessness, whether using the Housing First approach or other concepts, require a comprehensive approach and set new challenges for peer support. However, we believe that peer support in housing programs is based on generally valid principles.



The most important principle is that one's own lived experience of social exclusion is an important knowledge base in the formulation and implementation of social inclusion programs (including housing and ending homelessness), without which it is difficult to achieve a massive reduction in the number of people living in poverty, housing emergency and other forms of social exclusion. Theoretical knowledge is perceived as complementary to experience which is non-transferable, because it also relies on emotional experience. This results in the requirement of a hermeneutic translation of interpretations by different social groups - especially in the ideal opposition socially excluded x "successful". Only then is it possible to achieve mutual understanding of cultural, behavioural and language codes used by different social groups and to formulate programs and visions in common. The facilitator of these processes is just a peer consultant.

Putting together experiences of five European organisations providing a variety of services for homeless people can present the primary findings from several perspectives. The partners involved in this project are keen to share their findings with readers, and hope they will useful ideas for their work.

Apart from giving answers to the questions "What is peer support and how can it help our work?", in this guide we seek to promote a wider, multi-voiced discussion and research of the usage of peer support in the homelessness sector, as well as develop further learning.

For more information on the definition and purposes of peer support in homelessness services, see [FEANTSA's policy paper on peer support](#)



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CHAPTER

Guide

A FIELD OF OPPORTUNITIES

Aims and Practices of Peer Support Work in Homelessness Services

"It moves me when I see someone losing their faculties"

"I've lived with three people who haven't been in good health. Soon after being admitted to hospital, they died. I always had a good relationship with all of them and whenever they needed anything I didn't mind helping them. It came natural to me.

It touches me when I see someone losing their faculties and I don't hesitate to be there for them and help them in any way I can. I also think that maybe one day it will be me who needs help.

With one of my flatmates I had a great friendship and before he became ill, he also looked after me. He was always by my side. He was concerned about me eating well, having cigarettes, anything... details that you really appreciate.

When he needed to be looked after, I didn't think twice. I wanted to let him know that I was there for him. When he was moved to a care home, I felt alone. Every Saturday I went to visit him. We chatted. It was a bit sad because he talked about the flat. His only happiness, he said, was my weekly visit.

We missed each other a lot. I appreciated him as if he was a brother. One day he felt worse and told me that we didn't have many Saturdays left. And he was right; that was the last one. We never fell out. We had a great relationship. He was a noble person. I don't normally go to funerals, but I went to his."

(José, 6 years living on the street)

Being a peer support worker is being by someone's side and being a real person to the people in vulnerable life situations, through sharing knowledge, experiences, feelings, as well as reflecting and applying every-day procedures on a larger scale: those who share the same experiences, service providers and society. Being a peer support worker becomes a strength and a method of producing qualitative information. It is a path to having an alternative effect and a tool for working.

The key aim of incorporating peer support in the work of a homelessness organisation is to improve the outcomes of social work within housing support schemes and the homelessness sector as a whole. Employing (or engaging) peer workers along with the aim of making a shift in the organisational culture may seem to be a big step for an organisation with more conventional views of working with clients. Hence, it requires challenging much of the old working methods, practices and attitudes of the work community. Even though in the process many doubts may occur, it is important to keep in mind that by involving peers, i.e. people with similar experiences of social exclusion, professional support workers are able to better meet the needs of homeless people, and therefore gain better results in their work.

PARTICIPATION

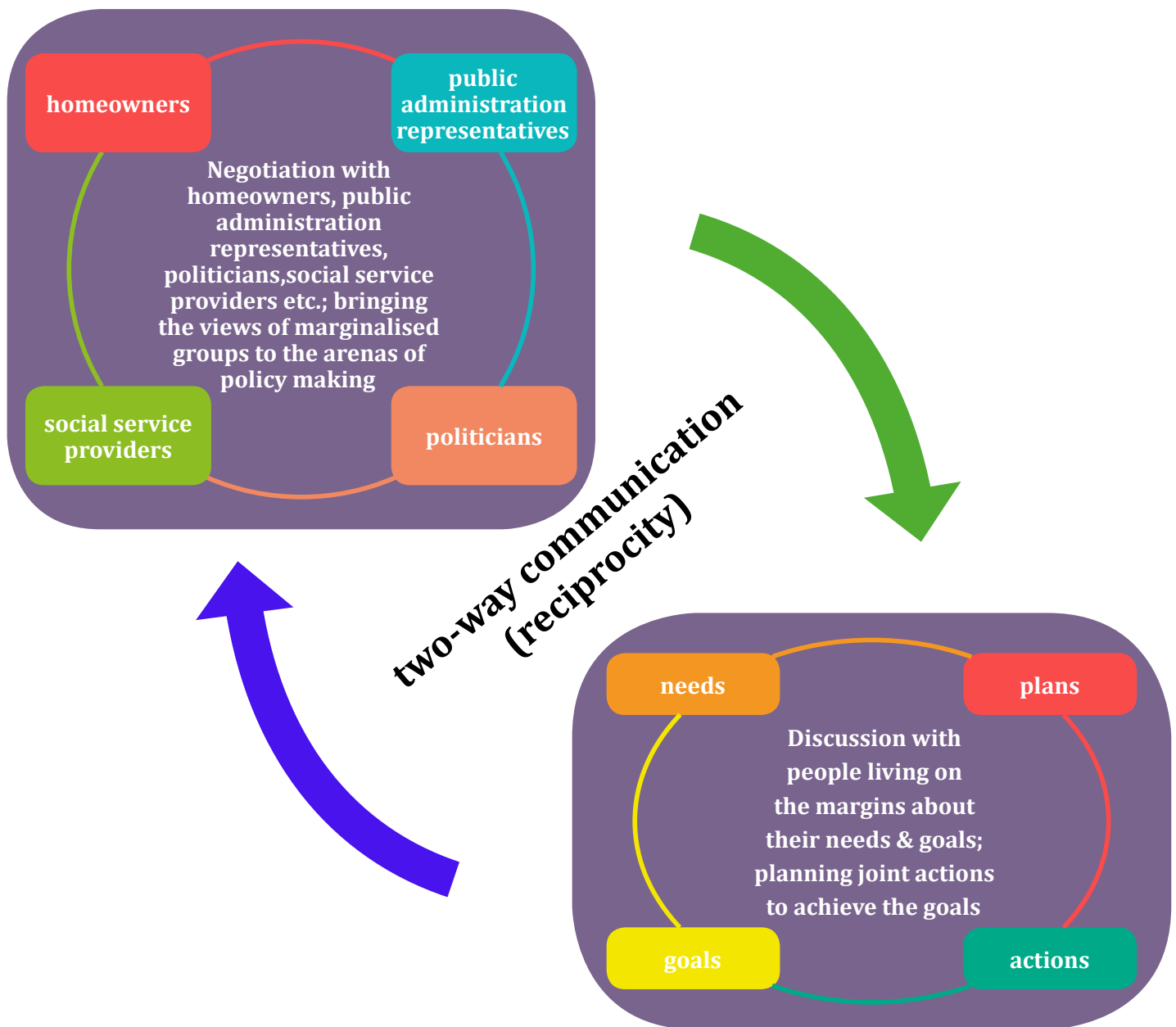


People who experience or have experienced homelessness are the real experts in planning and implementing practices aimed at ending and preventing homelessness. The participation of people who have experienced social exclusion is a prerequisite for the sustainable improvement of their life situation. Only direct involvement in solving one's own problems - formulating needs and priorities, designing and implementing specific steps - can lead to desirable results such as the elimination of social exclusion, poverty and homelessness. **We perceive the use of peer support as one of the basic tools for increasing participation,** and all of the potential roles and

tasks of the peer worker described below are interconnected in the recognition of the importance of one's active participation in solving her/his own problems.

For more information on participation principles, see [FEANTSA's participation toolkit](#)

Participation is ideally two-dimensional: horizontal and vertical among clients or service users (homeless people/residents) and housing providers/public authorities/decision makers. The communication between the 'grassroots' and decision makers should be reciprocal: the everyday experiences of people who are homeless are brought to the 'cabinets' - development meetings of homelessness programmes, and vice versa, the plans and decisions made in the 'cabinets' are forwarded to the service users.



Participating is stimulating

"When I arrived to Barcelona, everything was new to me. I'd never left Madrid and at first everything was like an adventure that I didn't know how it would end. Step by step I started adapting, and soon I started going to Arrels to change my clothes and have a shower once a week.

From the beginning, they suggested I take part in various activities. I made some roses to give away on St George's day. I'd never done any handcrafts and I enjoyed doing it. **The best part is seeing the finished product and knowing it's going to be useful.**

They also suggested I participate with the maintenance department. I go with them and set up flats for other people who have slept on the street, and fix any problems.

Participating and doing things is much better than being all day without doing anything. For me, it's a stimulation."

(Miguel, a peer)

Read more on participation: What do we mean when we speak of participation? Arrels Foundation

and On Participation and Being an Expert by Experience at Vva ry NGO

PEER SUPPORT IN PRACTICE: WHAT CAN THE PEER WORKER'S ROLE INCLUDE?

The peer support worker's role in the organisation depends on her/his personal life history and thus, the field of experience, and at the same time on the target group(s) of the service the organisation offers. Different service users have specific characteristics and needs, and therefore require specific forms of support. Maybe the best-known and methodically covered support schemes concern individuals suffering from mental illness and/or substance abuse. Even though these are very serious barriers to obtaining and maintaining housing, it should be kept in mind that there are also many homeless people who struggle with other issues, for example families and members of different minority groups among others. In their case, the reasons for housing emergency are different, and unfortunately also poorly described. It follows that specific support methods for these groups are both explored and covered rather scarcely, and in practice, these people often remain without adequate support.

Struggles for obtaining and maintaining housing concern a large number of people who have stayed at emergency or temporary housing, or out on the street. Overcoming continuation and/or recurrence of homelessness is therefore a crucial point when planning steps that lead to positive change – including having accommodation of a good standard. **The peer support worker is the one who has similar experience of overcoming barriers and discovering successful strategies, and is able to communicate them to the service user in a clear way.**

What are the tasks of a peer support worker?

1. act as a mediator between the professional worker and the service user in the support process,
2. participate in the concrete steps to be taken,
3. explain the causes of partial failures and/or turns on the path to change, and
4. increase the competence of the social support professional in understanding the details in supporting process.

Read the story of Ms Z of her motivation and strategy to become a peer worker

The job descriptions of a peer support worker can be diverse, consisting of narrowly defined tasks with less responsibility to a variable range of duties with a higher degree of responsibility - depending on the organisation, its field of activities as well as the 'level' of utilizing the expertise and skills of the peer support workers. Below, we introduce a few examples of the possible roles of peer support workers/experts by experience based on the different job descriptions (or special assignments) in the organisations who participated in creating this guide.



Examples of possible job descriptions of peer support workers/experts by experience

Helpline / advice
service worker

A peer support worker helping the residents of supported housing in coping with everyday life and as an intermediary between service providers/officials and the resident

A builder of a network of 'freelancer experts by experience' with other people who have experienced homelessness

A peer instructor in a working pair model: an expert by experience & a social work professional form a team → to benefit from each other's knowledge & competences

Lecturer by experience: lecturing to social work professionals, practitioners & students on her/his own experiences

Permanent member of policy and working groups which plan and develop homelessness services

A peer researcher: conducting interviews, interpreting responses together with a researcher, trained professional

A community worker: assisting the residents living in poor quality and risky neighbourhoods to collect and promote their requirements for improving housing conditions

A civic activist taking part along the professional workers in activities about prevention, i.e. motivating and supporting residents to prevent eviction

One of the roles mentioned above involves the participation of the peer support worker in a working pair/team/partnership model. In collaboration with a peer support worker, a social support professional modifies the way s/he works with service users. The model has been perceived as effective cooperation between peer support workers and social support professionals, where a clear division of roles, direct interactions, and consultation of specific support steps take place in support of the particular service user. The professional thus gains more insight into the service user's life situation and motivation, and can apply a more appropriate model for the whole process of change.

A Team Model/Working pair model - Mutual Benefits

- The peer support worker and the professional together get a comprehensive view of a service user's situation. The professional knows the service system and the peer knows how various services can meet the service user's needs. **The peer, as a former user of the services, brings grassroots level, experience-based knowledge into the work: how a service seems for the user, how it could work for the person who is in need of help and when it is not suitable to a certain client.** Together with the client, the situation becomes clearer and they can be offered efficient service.

- ▶ Being transparent and explaining one's situation to the authorities can be difficult for many people we work with. The peer support worker is seen as a much more approachable person, as they can sense the background of the situation without having to ask difficult questions. Perceiving and whole-heartedly understanding the situation increases the chances of a quick response.
- ▶ A peer support worker/expert by experience may also be a great benefit for a trained work partner. Good communication between the peer support worker and the professional is of key importance. It's important to explain the reasons why certain steps are taken. This helps the peer support worker to learn and avoid any confusion. It also helps to foster a supporting relationship between the two people. At best, it is co-operation that respects and appreciates the other partner:

"Somehow, it is discourse with the work partner, too. If the peer support worker sees that the professional does something, they can also ask if the professional knows what it is leading to. How does a service user see you when you behave like that? Have you noticed what can happen? They can actually start following you out there and, somehow, feel that you're against them. These things should be talked about and not just thought that, you know, they're a professional and they've been to schools, so they ought to know."

(Jenny, Expert by experience)

By involving peer workers in the activities of our organisation we can...

1. Increase self-confidence and self-reliance
2. Gain a deeper understanding of the issues that cause homelessness
3. Build trusting relationships between all involved
4. Create a more informed organisation
5. Develop networks
6. Support people to use their experiences to influence policy
7. Bridge 'the two worlds' of service users and public officials
8. Put the voices of those who use homelessness services at the centre and, as a result,
9. Improve services for vulnerable people
10. Enhance quality, (cost-) effectiveness of the services

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CHAPTER

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BECOMING A PEER WORKER

Skills and Attributes Required

HOW A PEER SUPPORT WORKER CAN HELP IN REDUCING STEREOTYPES

Billy Bob

He switched his career at Alcoholics Anonymous to a homeless activist identity. For many years, both in AA and in the field of homelessness he has been a real group leader type of a guy. He has been an author, then vendor, and later editorial staff of the 'Without a Roof' street paper; inventor and organiser of a sensitizing program that has reached 13.000 students so far. His strength does not lie in having intimate conversations, but he believes in the power of communities and good aims. He uses the power of communities with the same faith not only in his own recovery (he has been sober for over 20 years after 20 years of alcohol addiction), but also on a social level to combat housing poverty and negative stereotypes against homeless people. He personally prepares his peers to share their life stories in front of students in order to educate a prejudice-free generation. But when it is necessary, he blocks evictions with a live chain or organises training to raise awareness of officials who often get into contact with homeless people.

In this chapter, we present some basic knowledge, skills and personal qualities necessary for peer support work. As homelessness is a complex problem, and the needs of people living in homelessness vary on a wide range, many different kinds of support activities can be required on the road to recovery. The personal experience of peer support workers can work as an individual, tailored model. They can help with their own experiences, what they had gone through, since they have tested valid answers and solutions for many of the problems homeless people face. On the whole, peer support workers do not deal with crisis situations, but support their peers in revealing their life stories, enabling them to find the way out of homelessness or just to find a solution in certain situations.

As most support professions, peer support work also requires personal qualities. Presence of qualities such as empathy, reliability and open-mindedness are of special importance in peer support work. These qualities are mostly inherited and formed during socialization and fundamentally determine our personalities. We are speaking about features that others see in us and that are not consciously formed by us. However, they can be slowly and continuously developed by learning and raising awareness.

Professionals working with homeless people work with their own personality above all. This is especially true for peer support workers as their own past informs their approach to supporting others. **It is worth creating the system of relations in a way that their activities and tools stay much more flexible and easier to shape than those of professional support work, which are often rigidly fixed by the protocol of the organisation.**

See an example presenting the usefulness of a multi-sided peer support worker: [Story of Johnny and Theresa](#)

In the following, we are taking into account skills, methods, know-how and attributes helping the efficiency of the peer supporter. We will also see that in many cases the presence of these is an indispensable condition of the success of the work - whether the peer support worker works on the street, in institutions, with people in independent housing or in the wider community.

1. Experiences lived through and processed

Peer support work is by definition a supporting relation between people with common experiences. This relevant experience cannot be acquired at any professional training – peer support is the intervention itself, not only the mediator of it.

The most fundamental knowledge is the lived experience of homelessness and the journey to recovery. Processing one's life story enables the peer supporter to provide others with adequate answers; answers that s/he had already struggled for and finally found. Sharing these experiences also adds credibility and authenticity to the peer supporter.

The peer supporter has to be able to make a connection between challenges of the peer and his/her own experiences. They have to notice when the peer has chosen a road they have been on before – this is exactly the knowledge that can help the peer to change their life, and prevent further physical and psychological injuries.

In Menhely Alapítvány's **First Hand About Homelessness** program homeless people talk about turning points of their lives to an audience of students and adults by using their experience of homelessness. The approach using experiences as resources helps homeless people process their own life stories efficiently, making expertise out of disadvantages. Sharing such experiences also helps to challenge common misconceptions of homelessness across society.

[Read more about the programme](#)

2. Empathy

It is important that peer support workers should never think of themselves as exceptions, or as part of a hierarchy, but respect the individual way of everyone. This respect will affect the joint work as well: the relation between the peer supporter and the supportee will be advisory, mutual and not one of a leader and a guided person. Only the previous approach can truly serve the empowerment of the supported person. In personal recovery or improving the quality of life, focus on individuals and participation plays a determining role. Internalising these principles is compulsory for peer support workers not only regarding themselves, but also others: solutions have to be sought together (and not for), by engaging homeless people. In peer support work, the peer supporter has to focus on strengths in line with the recovery-centred approach.

3. Reliability

We are discussing skills that enable peer support workers to build a confidential relationship in which both they and the peer can feel secure. Peer support workers have to ensure, as soon as possible, that the peer understands and believes that everything said between them stays between them - meaning that the peer support worker cannot give information about the peer to anyone without the peer's consent. The peer must be informed about the data protection policy, both of the organisation and the wider legal framework.

Any work completed during meetings must be to the benefit of the peer and their recovery. Their relationship should remain professional.

In order to ensure co-operation, it is necessary to create a mutually confidential relationship; co-operation may be impossible if there is no confidence in the relationship. Building up trust is a long process as it is needed on many levels. Confidentiality between authorities and peer support workers, as well as other staff, is as important as it is between staff and those who use the services.

4. Communication skills

One of the greatest values of peer supporters is that they can mediate between the peer and other agencies. This alone, however, is not enough for efficient support. They mostly interpret between the peer and the supporting organisation, but it can also be needed at the workplace, at maintaining good relations with neighbours or at managing official issues. All in all, peer supporters speak a lot of languages.



It has to be reflected in their communication and behaviour that they are building an accepting, empathic and non-judgmental relationship, turning to the peer with interest and treating him/her as an equal partner.

They have to build an environment that strengthens pure, honest and open communication, as this can lead to the clear understanding of the peer's situation.

Communication of the peer support worker has to reinforce the feeling that peers have the right for self-determination, encourage them to take their opportunities into account, and have a critical view on advice, finally finding a solution of their own.

Peer supporters need a very good sense of timing. They have to find the right moment when to share chapters of their own history connected to the actual discussion of a problem with the peer in order to show relevant and possible solutions, or just make the situation more hopeful.

Reducing stereotypes about homelessness and creating an inclusive environment can be a great field for group peer support.

5. Cooperation skills

Peer support workers should consider how their professional contacts (with organisations and other support staff) can benefit peers. These connections can help to emphasise the benefits of recovery from homelessness for peers. Satisfying the needs of the peer is often impossible without help. In these cases external support is required. In order to use certain services or get donations, peer supporters have to be able to cooperate with support people, organisations and authorities. Thus peer support workers turn to the work of other supporting organisations with curiosity, get to know their methods and present them to the peer.



6. Critical thinking

These skills are required when the peer support worker tries to get to know and understand the history and actual situation of the peer. We are basically referring to critical thinking, the ability to ask the right questions that help the peer to reveal forgotten, suppressed chapters, illogical explanations of their life story – if and when the peer is ready for it.

Peer supporters have to be able to precisely define the real needs of the peer from identifying sources of danger to conditions to be created for change to happen. Therefore by using their communication tools at hand, they guide the discussion, encouraging the peer to be able to phrase and say thoughts, reveal situations that they did not want to share earlier.

Peer support workers notice and are aware of the problems revealed by the peer without judging them. They should regard any requests for help as a positive step towards recovery; asking for help demonstrates increasing confidence of the peer, and shows that s/he is able to cope with troubling situations.

The peer support worker has to detect when the peer is in danger or on the way to it. They have to confront the peer with the situation, and then they will look for a solution together. The peer support worker has to realise when the process gets to a stage beyond their capacities and has to ask for external help.

7. Specific skills

By specific skills we mean getting to know the work of the organisation where the peer support worker is employed. Efficient cooperation between the peer support worker and the organisation is necessary for successful support work. For this, getting to know basic values, regulations, available services and methods of the organisation are essential.

Understanding the situation and history of the peer can involve a large amount of information. Basic knowledge on available homelessness services, social allowances, operation of the health care system, administrative procedures or rights and responsibilities of tenants in case of people living in flats all evidently help peer support work.

Technical skills (using the telephone, computer, some applications, software) required for fulfilling certain positions are not described here.

What competencies are also important in peer support work

- processing, facing and reviewing personal life story
- self-knowledge
- healthy self-esteem
- acceptance (towards themselves and others)
- feeling competent
- motivation, common goals, cooperation skills
- verbal and non-verbal communication
- democratic decision-making
- representation of interests
- level of activity, expertise
- analytical skills, reflection
- organisational skills

CHAPTER

Guide

BEYOND HOMELESSNESS

Education, Training & Employment

In this chapter we show how the steps of recruitment, engagement and training opportunities can connect to reinforce the process of personal development. For gaining a deeper insight into this, you can read about the ongoing practice St Mungo's below.

In 2008, St Mungo's began a training scheme to help 12 clients develop skills and knowledge to become project and housing workers in the homelessness sector. In 2009, this training scheme became an accredited apprenticeship programme with Health and Social Care qualifications attached to each job role.

The St Mungo's Apprentice Scheme has now trained over 200 people who have lived experience of being homeless, sleeping rough, substance and problematic alcohol use, mental health and / or criminal justice services.

RECRUITMENT

St Mungo's recruitment process for apprentices has been constructed in a way that provides learning opportunities for people to begin developing skills from the time they complete the application form. It matches the recruitment process for all entry level roles such as Duty Worker and Project Worker. This ensures all candidates experience what it is like to apply, be interviewed and receive feedback so they are able to develop their skills and knowledge.

Candidates who are not successful are advised to Volunteer Services within the homelessness and housing sector so they can access training, experience what it is like to work in social care and build confidence in working with traumatised clients.

People who are shortlisted are invited to take part in a job interview involving a role play, panel questions and an English and Maths assessment.

People who are not successful are given feedback on how they can improve to prepare to apply again in the future. This can include becoming a volunteer with St Mungo's or similar organisation, attending training to help improve English or Maths skills or using other resources to help develop interview techniques and build confidence when taking part in an interview.

"I applied for a Housing First worker position in July 2016. I was invited for an interview but I was not successful - I had not prepared myself at all. I had never been interviewed formally before. Then I subsequently applied for the St Mungo's Apprentice Programme, which would give me an opportunity to continue working in a job I enjoy and gain a recognised qualification. The interview was less daunting than the first one, however, I attended fully prepared, although still quite nervous. I was notified the following day of my success at getting the position of Apprentice Housing First Worker. This really made me feel part of the team and part of something special. Now I have an employment contract so I feel more secure."

(A peer support worker)

ENGAGEMENT

All apprentices are given support, training and supervision to make sure they are able to highlight and access resources needed to improve and maintain their resilience whilst minimising any risk to their recovery.

The apprentice coordinator provides holistic, pastoral care to all apprentices during their employment in the form of 1:1 sessions, 3 way meetings with managers and monthly reflective practice sessions.

"As an apprentice, you attend 'Reflective Practice' - an opportunity for a group of apprentices to get together, sometimes with a therapist, to 'offload'.

You get rid of the good, the bad and the ugly in a confidential environment. It is an opportunity to soak and air views, especially when I had been struggling and needed help.

Each apprentice has a line manager based in the service they are completing their placement. This manager provides day to day support with daily tasks, IT, record keeping, key working and client support."

(A peer support worker)

RETENTION

It is important to make sure apprentices are fully supported in the ways described so they are able to maintain their job role, fully access the apprenticeship and training and build on the skills and knowledge they will need for their future career aspirations.

People who have lived experience and are in recovery will be working with clients who are having very similar experiences to themselves. There are times when this could be a risk to the apprentice or worker. They may relate too closely to the client, forgetting to maintain good working boundaries.

It is important not only for the organisation to recognise these risks but to make sure all workers and apprentices have access to a variety of support services both within and external to the organisation. St Mungo's apprentices are all supported through Reflective Practice sessions, Peer Support sessions, informal and formal training and 1:1 progress reviews focusing on wellbeing.

Providing this focused support, tailored to each person's needs not only means that an apprentice feels fully supported as they achieve each step of both their academic and work based tasks but reduces any sickness or absence issues, maximising the apprentices' experiences leading to a more confident person when they begin applying for full time, permanent job roles.

LEARNING, TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT

St Mungo's Apprentices take part in the same training as all other staff in the organisation. There are several mandatory training sessions that must be attended, including Data Protection, First Aid, Safeguarding Adults and Conflict Management.



QUALIFICATIONS

The St Mungo's Apprentice Scheme offers different job roles both in client facing projects and central services (head office) and because these roles are all different, there are different Diplomas on offer to match the roles.

- ▶ Business Administration Level 3
- ▶ Health and Social Care Level 2 or Level 3
- ▶ Kitchen Skills Level 2
- ▶ Customer Services Level 2

Qualifications are completed with an external provider and trainers attend meetings with the apprentice in their service each month.

Assessments are carried out in a variety of ways including observations, written work, exams and group work.

Apprentices also have the option of completing Maths and English Functional Skills qualifications if they did not gain these whilst at school.

"I was motivated to apply for the apprenticeship because I've been homeless myself. I like the idea of using my experience for a job. I also wanted to do the Level 2 Health and Social Care course. It seemed like a good way to do both. I had looked at doing the course outside of work but it's a lot easier to do it this way. It's good to be able to work while you're doing the course."

(A peer support worker)

ONGOING CAREER

Apprentices from St Mungo's are now employed in different types of jobs both within the organisation and with charities and organisations across the homelessness and social care sectors.

Former apprentices are now employed as managers after successfully completing the recruitment process in the same way as other staff.

4

CHAPTER

Guide

ENGAGING PEER SUPPORT WORKERS IN THE WORK COMMUNITY

How to get started with peer support?

"Not just a tick in a box!"

"[---] And it (employer) has to have a meaning (for employing) when they employ. I don't want it to be a tick in a box that now we have an expert by experience, or we have a peer support worker because it's in the budget, so [...]. [...] the organisation or just someone has to take the responsibility for the peer support worker..."

(Jenny - Expert by experience)

When an organisation working with homeless people decides to employ peer support workers, one of the central issues to be considered is how to ensure the equal treatment of peers with other employees and participants of the organisation. In an organisation where the whole concept of peer support is somewhat unknown, this requires careful planning and preparation, driven by senior management. The preparation could include, for instance, organising an information meeting to share information about the role of the peer support worker /experts by experience and purposes of their work.

We recommend that the organisation follows a guiding principle of integrating peer support workers at all levels of its activities: ensure that their voice will be heard in staff meetings and they will not be left out of joint decision making, and welcome peers into the team.

This chapter is mainly based on the conversation between an expert by experience and her supervisor working at Vva ry. All direct quotes in the text originate in the transcribed conversation.

See more about [the objectives set to the integration of peers in Barcelona](#)



SUPPORT AND SUPERVISION OF THE MANAGEMENT

When employing people with lived experience, sufficient time should be given to let people adapt to the new environment and role. Peers should be given appropriate training so they can

feel confident in their role, with access to required tools and information. Furthermore, **the management and the whole work community should accept mistakes, and, especially in the beginning, give peer workers constant supportive feedback.**

The organisation should make it possible for peer supporters, experts by experience and professional staff to take part in training and other educational events. However, it's important to mention that training can also be a burden, and put the peer support worker on an unequal basis with the service users:

"Let's give everyone the possibility to train but not a necessity... it can actually be a burden, the training.... Especially if you have been inside their world; it may give others the idea that you can't be trusted. They think that you look down on them."

The management's strong support is considered to be a major factor in coping with work stress of the peer support workers, and staff need to know that management takes the final responsibility. The supervisor should be able to estimate the ability of the employee to perform her/his tasks - being flexible to a certain extent - but at the same time ensure that the aims set in the peer support worker's job description are fulfilled and the general rules of work-life are respected (in accordance with labour legislation etc.). Management should work together with their team:

"[---] if you employ peer support, management can't simply sit in their ivory tower, give commands and assume that everything is sorted."

Management must also have a keen ear for the thoughts and problems peer support workers/experts by experience want to share, dedicate enough time for interaction, and show a comprehensive interest over the peer support workers'/experts' by experience background and 'experience curriculum vitae', with which they work:

"[---] of course, if they don't want to talk about their life, or need any help, then it's a different story. Anyway, I think they need the opportunity and it's looked through."

However, sometimes it might be challenging to separate and/or balance the different roles management can take as the supervisor, adviser and confidant.

To relieve and avoid work-related stress, management has to pay attention to the supervision of the peer support workers. **At best, supervision offers tools for dealing with difficult issues and possible problems with working methods.** If possible, management could consider also a possibility for external supervision. It may occur that among peer workers there will be different reactions to outside supervision. According to the experiences at Vva ry, some see it as strengthening their wellbeing, whereas others see it as time-consuming or even a waste of time.

Both internal and external supervision are important elements in making sure that peer support workers are able to feel confident with their capabilities and personal skills. Besides, supervision can help peer support workers overcome possible obstacles in their everyday work (e.g. understand both the service user and provider perspective) as well as during the different phases of their professional development.

THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF COLLEAGUES

A person with a vocational qualification and the peer support worker/expert by experience are in our understanding both professionals. **The expertise of both is essential and a team consisting of both may be referred to as multi-professional.** The knowledge of the one completes the other. Team members receive and offer a reflective surface with each other and exchange of knowledge and learning work bilaterally. Working as a team diversifies the ability to see certain situations and gives fresh angles to looking at them.

"We work collaboratively. A professional can help with such matters, that it isn't demanded, because we all have our strengths. Whatever it is. So that we could utilise each other's strengths in a way that would make work easier for everyone rather than sticking too much to a frameworks, like, now I need to write this report."

For the wellbeing of any work community, the functionality and ability to work together matters. Therefore it is vital to invest in strengthening the mutual understanding among staff, which can be made possible, for example, by everyone taking part in supervision.

MUTUAL SUPPORT BETWEEN PEER SUPPORT WORKERS

We recommend supporting peers in forming groups of peer support workers. Their own network strengthens the peer support of peer support workers and the distribution of information between services and municipalities. The group together considers training needs, peer support workers' work-related stress and how to bring matters to their superior and organisations' management.

"It's probably easier to bring matters forth if someone raises a problem, and then, as a group, they take it further somehow. It doesn't sound so abrupt to people if it's taken further after discussion and everyone is a little worried about the same thing. It probably makes the superior understand that it isn't just something that one person thinks is wrong."

One recommendable practice would be mentorship, where a more experienced (senior) peer support worker or expert by experience will guide a new peer by transmitting her/his knowledge and skills to the newcomer. The role of new peer support worker can be strengthened through mentorship by bringing up the emerging work challenges and the means of coping with them.



What the management an organisation should take into consideration when planning to involve peer support workers/experts by experience:

- Preparation of the staff for inclusion of peers in the work community e.g. by informing them about aims, input and the added value the engagement of peer support workers brings to the organisation.
- Support and supervision of the management are essential for strengthening the peer support worker's self-confidence in their skills & expertise, and the peer support workers & experts by experience must be able to trust that the management backs them up whenever is needed.
- Offering peer support worker an opportunity to get training and/or otherwise ensure that s/he will be provided with adequate information and tools to carry out the job.
- To relieve and avoid work-related stress, management needs to assure adequate supervision (desirably hired from outside of the organisation).
- Constant dialogue between other peer support workers, superiors and the rest of staff can prevent misunderstandings, improve work atmosphere and thus, is a key to successful team work.
- Management should have a comprehensive interest in the life history of peer support workers/experts by experience, as they use their lived experience as a central tool in their work.

CHAPTER

Guide

DIVERGENT APPROACHES TO PEER SUPPORT

Challenges & Development of the Practice

“Ms. D. was offered the chance to become a peer consultant in the Rapid Re-Housing project. In spite of the excellent abilities she had developed in her previous role, she was unable to work in a project team. The reason was that she had not resolved her inadequate housing situation. With her three minors, she has been living in shelters for several years, she has often moved and despite her efforts had not been able to find standard and stable housing (primarily because of discrimination in the housing market, which disadvantages Roma, single mothers and families with more children). She perceived the lottery (selection scheme for the Rapid Re-Housing project) as unfair. Instead she preferred the principle of deservingness. Finally she rejected the fundamental idea of the project and some of the Housing First principles.

After exiting the Rapid Re-Housing project, she was willing to share her experience of domestic violence voluntarily, and in two cases her interview with clients was crucial to their decision-making on the steps to end domestic violence in their families.

She had the motivation and general desire to help. She was also experienced and aware of the importance of the supportive assistance. She was able to help in individual cases, but she doubted the principles of the project and so refused to collaborate closely.”

Read the whole [case example of Ms D](#)

Read about Rapid Re-Housing Brno programme - [Czech Experience](#)

One of the key remarks made during the development of this guide has been that there are **significant differences in approaches to peer support work in virtually all aspects**. The role of peer support workers varies greatly, for instance: in work with supported people, position in a support team, target groups, profile and skills requirements of the peer support worker, training, general work orientation of the organisation, and stability of their work including the financial one etc.

For further development of peer support work it would be useful to reflect upon whether this diversity is useful or whether there should be a unification of approaches and procedures - and if so, to what extent. In this chapter, rather than concluding the substance of the previous chapters, the reader will become familiar with the basic dilemmas that come from divergent approaches, as well as be given examples of the challenges and problems faced in the peer work experience of the European homelessness organisations involved in the Trainhouse project. Furthermore, the chapter tries to give possible solutions to the pointed challenges, and to open up some prospects for peer support in the work with homeless people in the future.

6 CHECKPOINTS FOR PRE-EMPLOYMENT OF PEER SUPPORT WORKERS

1. Personal stability as the starting point

The individual should have personal stability when s/he becomes a peer. For instance, peers who work in the field of drug addiction are required to have completed a large period of time of abstinence. This is to reduce the risk of relapse, and to add credibility to the peer as a role model. The same thing happens in other fields such as mental health: it is essential that the person has stability and, if any complications should arise, it would be treated as any other sickness, by a specialist. However, there are organisations which do not have this requirement. In these, there are no other eligibility criteria for peer support work, which generally require that a peer support worker has to have her/his problems under control, be able to use them positively when working with the client, and be able to identify where the contact with the client is inappropriate.

Both approaches have their advantages and limitations. The involvement of peer support workers who have not solved their problems yet (dependency, housing distress, material poverty, problematic partnerships, etc.), puts higher demands on their support, management and supervision and strengthening their motivation.

Challenges and Possible Solutions

- Defining and creating specific support models/programmes for peer support workers with unresolved issues
- Creating methodological, educational, and supervision programmes for peer staff with unresolved issues, as well as for the other team members, in which the focus will be on making positive use of the peer support workers' experience in client work and their own development
- Support self-help groups for peer support workers with unresolved issues

2. Professional or Volunteer Peer Support Workers

It may be good to think about peer supporters both in the role of professionals and in the role of volunteers, depending on the organisation and its plan to make use of expertise by experience. However, if a peer is involved as a volunteer, it is necessary to clearly define her/his role and responsibility in the process of working with service users. We would encourage employment of peer workers as paid staff members on an equal basis with professional workers. However, for organisations which mainly function on voluntary basis and whose financial resources are therefore limited, a peer volunteer programme would be an option, too.

Challenges and possible solutions

- Hierarchies and conventional stances on expertise by experience. Reluctance of management/staff to accept peers as paid co-employees by reducing their role for carrying out voluntary-level tasks only
- Creating specific role descriptions for professional peer workers and volunteering peers, when applicable
- Clear distinctions and limits of the role of volunteer peers
- Creating systems and financially sustainable positions for peer workers in identified areas

3. The importance of knowing where best to place a peer support worker

When someone at a suitable stage of recovery becomes interested in working as a peer, it is important to decide where s/he will perform that role. Should it be in the same place where s/he has attended? Or maybe would it be better in a different location? The conclusions and viewpoints of this matter may be diverse, however, we recommend that it needs to be discussed further.

In the case of social organisations that have not yet made the first step towards peer involvement in their teams, some doubts about how to make the leap towards that new experience might appear, and that will be normal. It would be desirable to overcome this initial resistance and accept that, as with every process, peer role implementation will demand some changes and several mistakes will be made, but this will also mean progress, since it can trigger potential strengths that will be valuable and represent the future of social intervention.

Challenges and possible solutions

- For the effectiveness of team work, it is beneficial to maintain a lay view of their work, where quality is a variety of views, not just expertise



4. The hardship of putting one's personal life at stake

Telling her/his story is usually an essential part of work as a peer supporter. Achieving genuine confidentiality based on interaction cannot be achieved without talking about one's own experiences, and many have found it a burden on their work. On the other hand, **working, for instance, at a low-threshold service is hard**, as a peer relates to the life situation of those who visit the place:

"... it's such a rough lot we work with. Helping them out with things. A peer support worker needs a little more understanding and support through supervision. [---] They (the professional staff) can draw the professional line in a way that you don't have to know everything. Soak it in in the same way. A peer support worker may soak in too much in a situation like that, which might be a little too close to their own situation sometimes. So that it might become a burden because you understand."

(Jenny, Expert by Experience)

Everyone has to evaluate how much of their own story they want to talk about, when and how, and the managerial team has to take it into account.

Challenges and possible solutions

- ▶ Peer support workers/experts by experience often have to open up their own life stories to develop trust and confidentiality. Many have found sharing their stories a burden on their work
- ▶ The working method of telling one's own story could/should elevate peer supporters to homeless experts - experts by experience who have lived through similar life situations, but who are not expected to open up their background

5. Training, supervision and other organisational support

To work in the field of supporting homeless people, and in social services in general, specific training must be made. This is true for peers as well. Training is necessary for the peer to start performing their role; one of the best ways is professional experience and being in contact with the different types of social intervention. The art of listening, reflecting the conversation with the client, communication, etc. are areas undoubtedly useful for effective client work. Education in social work and counselling techniques can be assumed to work synergistically with the exclusive competence of peer workers, which is their inexhaustible life experience.

Challenges and possible solutions

- ▶ Due to formal training, unification of language codes in intra-team communication, formalising the spoken language too much may limit peer support workers specific view and reflection of the support process
- ▶ On the other hand, the usage of two different language codes may reduce the sensitivity of different team members (educated vs. experienced) of understanding one another



- Adapt 'formal tools' of social work when communicating with the service user to the detriment of using his or her life experience and the language close to the service user
- Adapt peer staff training to their individual plans
- Put the main focus specifically on the area of training and its contribution to the counselling process and the work of the whole team
- Using volunteer collaborators to reflect team work practices
- Peer consultants' mutual exchange of experiences & good practices

6. Overcoming fears is essential: Limits, fears, risks and responsibilities in incorporating peers in the homeless support work

The process of incorporating peers in teams supporting homeless people who enter housing programmes should take into account certain limits, fears and risks that may arise as well as clearly define responsibilities. The objective is to make clear from the start the roles of the peer and all team members.

The peer will work and will have contact with people in vulnerable situations similar to their own; this mirror-effect can provoke empathy and the desire to carry out high-quality social accompaniment, based on a total understanding of the life experience. However, it can also emotionally affect the peer and trigger past trauma. This is why it is of vital importance that the person is in a stable situation and can count on the trust and confidence of the rest of the team.

In this sense, the team needs a period of adaptation that must serve to remove many of the doubts and, above all, to break down prejudices against the person who has lived on the street and who, with their experience, joins the team as a peer. Just as myths and prejudices towards the most vulnerable people exist in society, they are also to be found in social support teams. That's why an open and questioning attitude needs to be maintained.

Read more about responsibilities, limits, and risks in employing peer support workers according to the experience at Arrels Foundation [here](#)



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