



# EVALUATION REPORT

## Evaluation of the Peer Supporter and Systems Navigator Roles at SOLID Outreach Society

June 2021



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We respectfully acknowledge that we live and work on the unceded traditional territory of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the traditional territories of x<sup>w</sup>məθkwəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxw u7mesh (Squamish), Səli lwətał (Tsleil-Waututh), WSÁNEĆ (Saanich), Lkwungen (Songhees), Wyomilth (Esquimalt) peoples.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Background:

Two roles were implemented at SOLID Outreach Society to provide supports to peer workers in the organization. The Peer Supporter (PS) provides a listening ear and offers peer-to-peer support services for peer workers. The Systems Navigator (SN) connects peer workers to various external resources, including providing housing referrals, legal support, etc.

## Methods:

The purpose of the evaluation was to assess the process and outcomes of implementing the PS/SN roles at SOLID Outreach Society and inform the improvement of these supports for peer workers. 10 qualitative telephone interviews were conducted between September 2020 and February 2021 with: 1) Service providers, i.e. individuals who have been involved in the PS/SN role or service provision, and 2) Service users, i.e. peer workers at SOLID Outreach who have used the PS/SN services. The interview transcripts were organized in NVivo. Through thematic analysis and interpretive description, key themes were identified and shared with the peer workers for data validation.

## Findings:

### Evolution of roles

- Initially, individuals were hired for two separate roles; PS role and SN role. Given the significant overlap between the roles, SOLID eventually started focusing on provision of PS/SN services for peer workers rather than having two separate roles. The services are now offered by multiple staff, including management staff at this peer-run organization.

### Benefits and Impact

- Through the PS/SN services, peer workers are able to feel part of a community whereby service users and providers alike feel that they have a “family” to lean on.
- The availability of PS/SN also makes peer workers feel cared for and this creates a sense of positivity among them which has community-wide ripple effects.
- Through SN services, peer workers have improved access to external resources, including housing.

### Strengths

- Informal structure of service provision: This is considered a strength because it avoids the bureaucracy of formal programs, making the PS/SN services are more accessible and acceptable for peer workers.
- Shared lived/ living experience: This facilitates trust and understanding between the service users and providers.
- Compassionate personality traits of the service providers: Enable the service users to connect with service providers and allow the latter to open up about their needs.

### Challenges

- Newness of the roles and the unpredictability of work.
- Lack of awareness about the PS/SN services.
- Personality clashes between some service providers and service users.
- Difficulty establishing trust due to historical and systemic distrust based on previous experiences as well as fear of losing their jobs.
- Compassion fatigue and moral distress felt by service providers due to the long hours, inability to unwind, and high expectations from service users.
- Onset of COVID-19 has introduced several challenges, including increased burnout and staff turnover which has led to increased demand for the PS/SN services and higher workload for the service providers.

## Recommendations:

- Having designated staff members in the PS/SN roles as well as having some external service providers accessible for peer workers.
- Create a culture of support in the organization so that the workload can be shared and more people can be supported.
- Increased training for service providers.
- Increased awareness about the PS/SN services.

# BACKGROUND

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## ILLICIT DRUG OVERDOSE EMERGENCY

Illicit drug toxicity is the leading cause of unintentional death in the province of British Columbia (BC) [1]. In 2016, the provincial government declared a public health emergency due to the unprecedented increase in illicit drug overdoses [2]. While mortality is occurring across the province, the three cities with the highest burden are Vancouver, Surrey, and Victoria [1].

## THE PEER2PEER PROJECT

In BC, peer workers—persons with lived/living experience of substance use who support people who use substances (PWUS)—are at the forefront of harm reduction efforts. They perform a variety of services, including distribution of harm reduction supplies, peer witnessing of substance use, referrals to services such as housing agencies, advocacy, outreach, overdose response, and research [3].

Working in overdose response settings can be stressful and traumatizing, with lasting social, emotional, and mental health effects for individuals [4–6]. Unlike other front-line workers such as paramedics, doctors, and nurses who have access to employee assistance programs and resources, peer workers often lack resources and mental health supports from their organizations. Ongoing stress and lack of workplace supports for peer workers can lead to compassion fatigue and burnout [7–9].

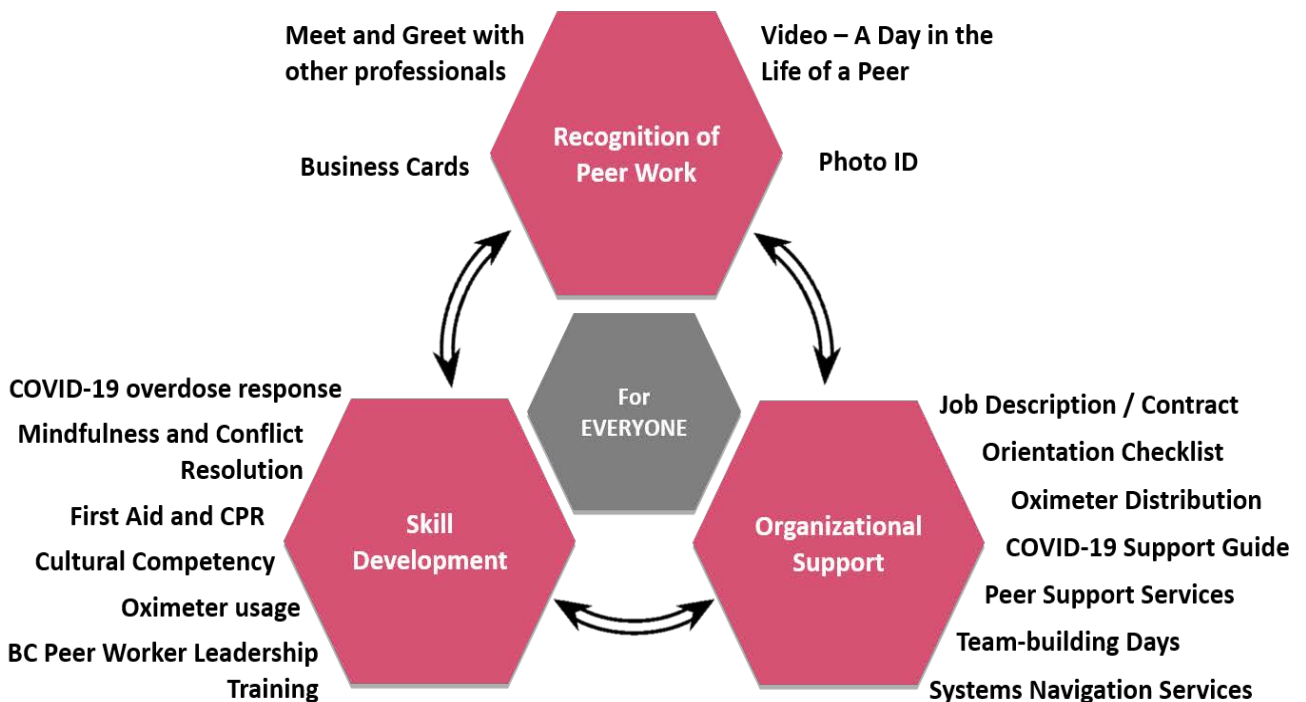
The Peer2Peer research project aims to identify, implement, and evaluate supports for peer workers in overdose response environments in BC. The Peer2Peer research project is based at two organizations located in four cities that spanned three of the five BC health regions: 1) SOLID Outreach Society - a peer worker-led organization in Victoria that educates, advocates and provides services for individuals that use substances [10], and 2) RainCity Housing - a not-for-profit, housing-first organization in Vancouver, Coquitlam and Maple Ridge, that provides housing and support services for people living with mental health, substance use, and other challenges [11].

## The ROSE Model

Eight focus groups were conducted between November 2018 and March 2019 at the pilot sites to identify the key support needs of peer workers at overdose response settings. The findings of the focus groups were categorized into three overarching themes which formed the basis of the ROSE model: R- Recognition of Peer Work, O – Organizational Support, and S – Skill Development. The E in ROSE emphasizes that the resources developed are for Everyone to highlight the inclusivity of the intervention and the commitment of the peer workers at the pilot sites to make the resources available to all organizations across BC.

The ROSE model is comprised of three major components with several strategies being implemented at the pilot sites (see Figure 1 below). One important strategy identified was the implementation of the Peer Supporter and Systems Navigator roles (PS/SN) at SOLID Outreach Society. This evaluation assesses the usefulness and impact of the PS/SN roles.

**Figure 1: The ROSE Model**





### *The Peer Supporter Role*

As highlighted in a recent paper published by the Peer2Peer team, one of the key stressors identified by peer workers was the constant exposure to trauma and loss of lives [12]. Peer workers are often unable to unwind after a stressful day and are often called upon to support community members outside the work environment. Furthermore, peer workers share the lived experience of the PWUS they support and can relate deeply to stories of trauma, which can amplify their stress. In addition, the clients that peer workers support are often friends and family members, making the death of clients much more personal and re-traumatizing. This can impact peer workers' mental health and well-being.

As a result of this need, the role of a Peer Supporter (PS) was implemented at one of the pilot sites, SOLID Outreach Society. The PS is a person with lived/ living experience of substance use that provides a listening ear and peer-to-peer support services for peer workers. According to the PS job description created in collaboration between the Peer2Peer Project and SOLID Outreach [13], the PS provides direct peer-to-peer lifestyle and employment support for those doing overdose prevention work. The PS offers check-ins about workload, vicarious trauma or re-traumatization, burnout, stress management, self-care and substance-use planning or maintenance options. Shared lived experience between the peerworkers and the PS helps to facilitate trust and understanding as well as foster a special bond of care and comfort [14].



### *The Systems Navigator Role*

Another stressor reported by peer workers, which was highlighted in a recent peer reviewed paper, was the lack of access to social services as well as basic determinants of health such as housing [12].

Peer workers at SOLID Outreach suggested having a designated staff member within the organization, i.e., the Systems Navigator (SN) who would improve access to external services. According to the job description, the Systems Navigator provides supports to SOLID Outreach members/ workers and connects them to various external resources, including providing housing referrals, legal support, etc. The Systems Navigator acts as a liaison between SOLID members and other services, and ensures that SOLID members have all the necessary supports for adequate physical and mental health [13]. The Systems Navigator also builds relationships with external services and researches services to provide easy referrals to peer workers. Like the Peer Supporter, the Systems Navigator is a person with lived/ living experience of substance use with shared experience with the peer workers to facilitate trust and understanding.



# METHODOLOGY

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## EVALUATION PURPOSE

The overall purpose of this evaluation was to assess the process and outcomes of implementing the PS/SN roles at SOLID Outreach Society and inform the improvement of these supports for peer workers.

## EVALUATION OBJECTIVES

1. To understand how the PS/SN roles were implemented at SOLID Outreach and how they evolved over time.
2. To recognize how the peer workers access these supports.
3. To assess the strengths, benefits and impact of these services as well as any challenges faced in these roles.
4. To inform future implementation and expansion of these roles to overdose response settings elsewhere.

## EVALUATION DESIGN

This evaluation was a formative evaluation, with components of both process and outcome evaluations aiming to provide constructive information about the strengths and weaknesses of the implementation processes as well as outcomes of the PS/SN roles [15].

The evaluation incorporated a community-based research design, whereby peer workers were involved in multiple parts of the evaluation, from the development of the evaluation questions to data validation. These researchers are referred to as Peer Research Assistants (PRAs).

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The evaluation used qualitative methods of data collection. Qualitative telephone interviews were conducted between September 2020 and February 2021 with: 1) Service providers, i.e. individuals who have been involved in the PS/SN role or provision of PS/SN services, and 2) Service users, i.e. peer workers at SOLID Outreach who have used the PS/SN services.

We used purposeful sampling of participants who either have experience providing PS/SN services or have used these services. Participants were recruited by their organizational managers.

All interviews were conducted by a researcher external to the Peer2Peer project to ensure that participants had an opportunity to share their experiences with someone who had not already been involved in developing the ROSE model. Each interview lasted approximately 30-minutes, and participants received \$25 CAD as an honorarium.

Prior to the interview, written informed consent was obtained. The interviews began with a brief review of the background, key points of the consent form, and purpose of the interview. Verbal consent was also obtained and recorded before proceeding to the interview questions. Interviews were guided by two separate semi-structured interview guides depending on whether the interview was being conducted with a service provider or service user. The guides were informed by the research objectives.

- The service provider interview consisted of questions about the uptake and utility of the services, the types of supports provided, the process of implementation of these services, the kinds of training received to prepare for the roles, strengths and challenges associated with the roles, and recommendations for improvement.

- The service user interviews included questions about the types of supports they had received, the processes involved in accessing the PS/SN services, factors that drive or hinder the use of these services, benefits and challenges associated with having these services, knowledge of these services, and recommendations for improvement.

As the interviews progressed, the guide was adjusted to remove questions that elicited repetitive responses, and new questions were added based on interim findings. Interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached (i.e., when no new information emerged).

The interviews were audio-recorded, and the recordings were transcribed verbatim by an external transcriptionist. De-identification and memoing were performed on raw transcripts to reveal the key themes, which formed the basis of the coding framework. The final coding framework was inputted into NVivo (QSR International, version 12), where segmenting and coding were performed by one academic researcher. The key themes were summarized and presented to the PRAs for data validation and assistance with interpretive description to generate practical and applied knowledge from the data and situate the findings within the real-world context. This study received research ethics approval from the University of British Columbia Research Ethics Board (REB #: H18-00867-A007).

In addition to the interviews, a report on the progression of the roles was provided by the management staff at SOLID Outreach and considered as part of the findings.

# FINDINGS

Ten interviews were conducted. No new themes were emerging by the 10th interview. The interviews were conducted with:

- Five service users, i.e. individuals who have accessed PS/SN services
- Five service providers, i.e. individuals occupying the PS/SN roles or other staff involved in PS/SN service provision

## IMPLEMENTATION OF SERVICES

### Evolution of PS/SN Roles at SOLID Outreach Society

Initially, SOLID hosted drop-in sessions where peer workers could come in to share knowledge, brainstorm, and hash out their problems. It was a good avenue for individuals to check in on each other and identify support needs. As mentioned by one service provider:

“

*“Yeah, from what I remember, SOLID [has] had all kinds of, I mean, this is pre-COVID, of course, but all kinds of drop-in courses when people would kind of share knowledge, share kind of what’s going on out there, what’s going on with people’s health, people’s concerns, housing concerns. [That would lead to] just supporting one another.”* – Service Provider 4

”

Some interviewees mentioned that these support groups were useful for peer workers and made them feel more secure. In the words of one service user:

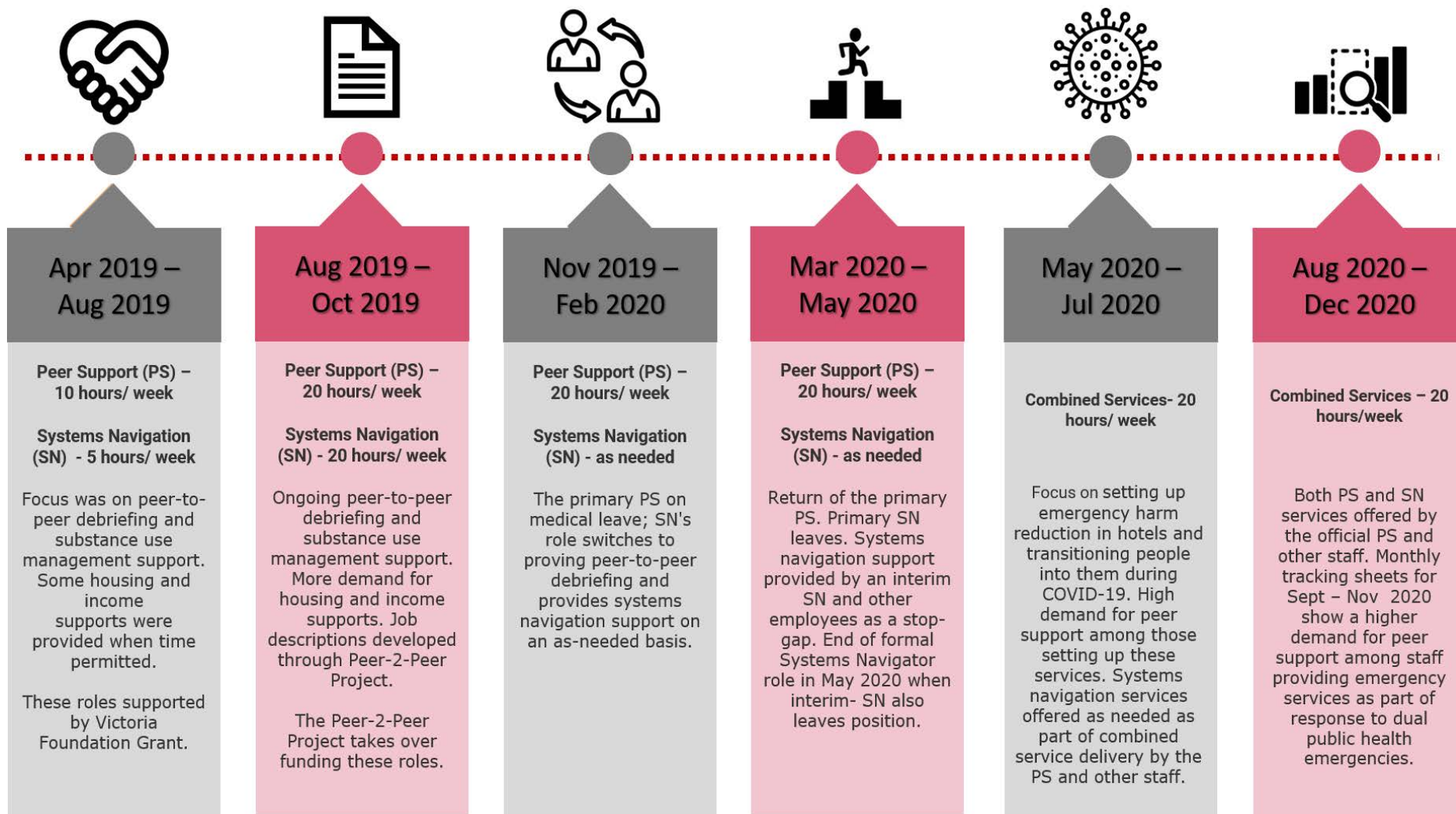
“

*“[Peer workers] feel more secure [...] knowing that there’s groups coming up where they might be able to say what’s on their mind a bit. And hopefully have whatever their issue is addressed.”* – Service User 5

”

The support groups were useful in providing peer workers the space and platform to talk about their feelings and experiences, but lacked the one-on-one support and follow-through when referrals to external resources were required. This pointed to the need for PS/SN roles, which were created at SOLID Outreach Society in April 2019. One role was that of the Peer Supporter (PS) and the second role was that of the Systems Navigator (SN). The timeline below describes the progression of the PS/SN roles at SOLID Outreach Society and more details are explained in the narrative following the timeline.

Figure 2: Progression of PS/SN roles at SOLID Outreach Society



Between April 1, 2019 and mid-August 2019, the roles were funded through the Victoria Foundation Grant. In mid-August, the Peer-to-Peer Project initiated funding of these roles. Aligned with findings from the focus groups, job descriptions were created for each of the roles. Templates of these job descriptions were also created as part of P2P organizational resources and shared widely so that other organizations can adapt them based on their own needs. These have been posted on <https://towardtheheart.com/peer2peer-project>.

While two separate job descriptions were developed, in practice the two roles overlap and individuals in each role worked hand in hand. Often, the individuals occupying the roles filled in for each other and assisted each other in the provision of services. This complementary relationship between the two roles was described by many of the service providers:

“

*“One thing always kind of bleeds over into the other. I think it would be challenging to say ‘okay, [Person A] does this, [Person B] does this, [Person 3] does this. I think that would be challenging ‘cause I think we’re always going to have other little tasks that just fall into our lap.” – Service Provider 4*

*“Unless the two positions are working together, they’re both going to fail. Without providing stable housing, people are going to be in constant crisis; without providing support, people are going to lose that housing. So, we have to work together anyway.” – Service Provider 1*

”

The two roles also have a shared goal, as described by one service provider:

“

*“I would say [the two roles] have one goal and that’s to have long-term stability and help the individuals [peer workers] in our organization.” – Service Provider 1.*

”

Over time, it was observed that having two separate roles was ineffective. Given the complementarity of the roles, staff turnover, and the varying amount of comfort peer workers felt with different service providers, it was eventually decided that it was best for the organization to focus on provision of PS/SN services for peer workers rather than having two separate roles of a Peer Supporter and a Systems Navigator.

At present, multiple people with basic training in counseling skills and awareness of external services and systems, mostly those within management positions at the peer-run organization, are involved in providing the PS/SN services for peer workers. Over time offering peer support and systems navigation has become a natural part of many management staff’s work. As one service provider mentioned:

“

*“I was sort of just doing it [providing these services] naturally because of my regular role at the organization.” – Service Provider 1*

”

The idea of the services being offered by multiple staff, including management staff naturally as part of their work was also echoed by some service users. In the words of one service user when asked about the process:



*“Well, [the PS] was actually just the management. I just have a good relationship with most of them to the point where I can pretty much talk to them about anything. [...] But I wouldn’t say that there’s like an actual setup system for peer support. I mean, I’m sure we’d like to get there. But no, there’s no set person or anything. I just go and talk to them when I need to.” – Service User 3*



The above quote suggests a close relationship and comfort level between peer workers and the individuals perceived as their managers, rather than a supervisory relationship. This is perhaps due to the fact that SOLID Outreach is a peer-run organization whereby shared lived experience facilitates trust and connection, regardless of the roles individuals may occupy within the organization.

## Types of Services Provided

When the roles first started in April 2019, the services offered included peer-to-peer debriefing, substance use management support, housing support and income assistance. Over time, the number of services offered through the roles (both individually and combined) increased based on the needs of the peer workers. While not exhaustive, the following is a list of services that are currently offered, as indicated by the interviewees as well as SOLID Outreach reports:

Peer-to-peer debriefing and counseling	Referrals to detox and/or treatment
Recognize and navigate vicarious trauma and burnout	Prescription navigation and management (opioid prescription)
Assist in dealing with mental health challenges	Legal advocacy (eg. Letters, court support)
Overdose follow-up of workers in Overdose Prevention Services (OPS)	Housing and evictions, including housing referrals
Conflict resolution and navigation of interpersonal issues amongst staff	Accompaniment to services eg. Housing, primary care/ hospital, pharmacy, etc.
Personal support – family issues	Hospital advocacy
Loss and grief support	Identity document applications and replacement. eg. Birth certificate, ID cards, etc.
Withdrawal and substance use planning and maintenance support	Finance-related support, including income assistance forms, budgeting, taxes, etc.
Safe supply outreach	Assistance with getting a phone number

## Structure

Staff at SOLID Outreach are a tight-knit, family-like community. As such, there is no formal structure in place to identify the needs of peer workers or to identify the appropriate service provider to support with the needs. The needs of the peer workers are identified and responded to in two ways:

- 1) The peer workers in need of the PS/SN services approach service providers (i.e. individuals occupying the PS/SN roles or other staff providing these services) that they feel most comfortable with for their needs. For example, as stated by some interviewees:

“

*“If ever there was anything I needed to talk about, I would just either call the person or go to the office and anybody who was there I could pretty much go to and spill my beans on what I was dealing with or problems that I was having.” – Service User 3*

”

- 2) Service providers informally check in on peer workers during their shifts and try to proactively identify their needs and offer relevant supports.

“

*“I always make it a point in my days to at least show my face once or twice around our different sites, around the office or substitution program and whatnot. Just kind of touching base with everybody and having the hands on the ground or boots on the ground. Talking to people is where I get most of the information that can actually see how people are day-to-day and if things have started changing for them, I am a little bit more apt to pick up on it instead of having somebody call me and tell me like, ‘hey, so-and-so’s having a problem, you know’.” – Service Provider 3*

”

This process was also echoed by several service users who illustrated the value of the informal and proactive check-ins that service providers conducted.

“

*“I’m friends with a lot of them and they reach out to me quite regularly, like, on an informal basis which really helps me feel like part of like almost like a family. Which is why I really appreciate their informal sort of tendencies.” – Service User 4*

*“[Peer Supporter X] was always super friendly and outgoing and checking in with you, seeing how people are doing and just made me feel comfortable enough. If he could see that I was not doing good or having a bad day or something, he’d actually go out of his way to maybe call me later or something. Check with me to see how I was doing.” – Service User 2*

”

In both cases, the person who responds to the need is selected based on the relationship with the service user as well as the experience of the service providers in tackling that particular issue. For example, if a peer worker requires assistance getting a government issued identity card, they may be referred to a particular service provider who has helped other peer workers obtain an ID. This is reflected in the quote below:

“Well, it kind of depends on the relationship that [name] or myself have with the individual. If let's say [name] has more of a rapport with them then he might spearhead [the provision of support]. Or we might go at it together. It kind of just basically falls on who's more apt for the situation.” – Service Provider 3

Many service users indicated that they preferred this informal structure of the PS/SN services as it makes them feel more comfortable. In the words of one service user:

“I tend to have an issue with authority so a formal process can, in fact, kind of turn me off the services. And gets me very agitated at everything.” – Service User 4

The informal structure also improves access to services as it avoids the bureaucratic referrals processes and allows service users to approach whoever they feel comfortable with:

“It's nice to be able to have a, like, an ear or a shoulder almost, kind of thing. It's good that I can at least have someone that [is] easily attainable or easily acceptable. – Service User 5

These quotes highlight the accessibility and acceptability of the PS/SN services whereby peer workers can approach any service provider for assistance.

## Record-Keeping

In keeping with the informal nature of the PS/SN services, there was no emphasis on record-keeping and data tracking. Furthermore, there was no established or standardized system for record-keeping. As such, different service providers maintain records in different ways, some more detailed than others. For example, one service provider mentioned keeping thorough records but de-identifying the service user and keeping the notes in a locked cabinet:



“We’ve done birth certificate applications and housing and if we kept their information, we would put it in a file with the first two letters of their name and the first two letters of their last name so it was non-identifying on the file, but we knew what it meant. And then it’s behind three locked doors. So, it’s all safe. All the files are safe. But if we did keep records it would be in that capacity, be locked up, safe, secure, one would hope.” – Service Provider 2

Other service providers keep more private and informal records for their own reference and memory. In the words of one service provider:

“[I keep notes] mostly just privately, mostly just in my phone. [...] So basically, [I am] just sitting and talking with them, and then afterwards, sometimes, I’ll take a few notes or write down some thoughts of what could help them. But I think it would be a little intimidating for people if I’m sitting there with a notebook or a computer and doing a lot of that. So, it’s more just privately, once in a while I’ll write a few things down or suggestions of what could help people.” – Service Provider 4

Many service providers and users commented that they preferred that there was no or minimal record-keeping as that ensured their confidentiality and facilitated trust, allowing peer workers to open up about their needs. In the words of the participants:

“As far as, like, me going in and just talking to them about my own personal stuff or something that I’ve experienced, no, they didn’t take notes or anything. Which I kind of appreciated too, because then it kept that confidentiality and, that’s something that I was aware of. Which is a little bit easier on my head than saying, ‘yeah, it’s confidential, but I’m going to take these notes’. But that’s just how I feel.” – Service User 3

“A lot of concerns that other people have that they come to me with [...] confidentiality’s the big thing. So basically, just sitting and talking with them, and then afterwards sometimes I’ll take a few notes or write down some thoughts of what could help them. But I think it would be a little intimidating for people if I’m sitting there, like, with a notebook or a computer and doing a lot of that.” – Service Provider 4

Many PWUS may have historical and ongoing experiences that result in distrust of more bureaucratic organizations. As such, the informal nature of the PS/SN services as well as minimal record keeping was highlighted as a strength that was viewed as a facilitator for developing trust and maintaining confidentiality in a peer-run organization.

## Training

Like other aspects of the PS/SN services, training for the service providers was rather informal. The knowledge and skills of service providers came from multiple sources:

- 1) **Lived/ Living experience:** Many service providers indicated that their knowledge and skills to do their jobs came from their own lived experience.

“

*“I found a lot of areas where the help was inadequate and I had to do it myself. So, I learned it from life experience. I had to go through the system [...]. So, I learned it all in order to save my life, I guess.” – Service Provider 1*

”

Even service providers that did go through training in other forms mentioned that it was their lived/ living experience that truly helps them in doing their jobs. They often draw on their lived experience and naturally know how to work with PWUS:

“

*“I have qualities that other people don’t have. But I think not just lived experience in terms of substances, just in general. The way I’ve lived my life has kind of helped. Being an addict, knowing - say with the stigma piece - it’s like knowing that I don’t want to be stigmatized, I don’t want to be judged, I don’t want to be spoken down to. I think that does help.” – Service Provider 4*

*“Having a common lived experience is definitely the most important thing when it comes to peer support role. I can [say] ‘I’ve been there, done that’ kind of thing. I recognize it in other people after years [and] years of [...] seeking supports from other friends or agencies and whatnot. And it kind of put me on the path to have that kind of interpersonal skillset to be able to talk with the certain individuals and employees, staff, you know. And not come across as like the suit across the table with the textbooks and everything. I guess that’s the whole point to being a peer supporter. – Service Provider 3*

”

These quotes indicate that lived/ living experience has equipped service providers with certain skills that enable them to do their roles well. The second quote suggests that the lived/ living experience of the PS/SN also helps to facilitate trust and understanding between the service providers and the service users.

- 2) **Previous work experience:** Some service providers indicated that their work experience has helped them in their work as PS/SN:

“

*“I’ve been a community support worker for about 10 years before I came into this position. [...] So, I kind of had [the] working knowledge. There was some kind of unofficial training through the company that I was with at their head office when I came into the management role. – Service Provider 3*

”

- 3) **Education and Training:** Many service providers talked about the education and training that they have received which has or hasn’t helped them in their roles as PS/SN:

“

*“Some of the training that I’ve done kind of bleeds over into this too. Like cultural safety, stopping the violence and, stuff around stigma and stuff like that, right. Which for a lot of us is common sense, but for a lot of others, it’s not common sense. It’s not their first nature. So, it’s really good to have that.” – Service Provider 4*

”

One service provider also discussed the limitation of formal education since textbooks and trainings are often designed for a particular context and do not take into account the current circumstances and experiences:

“

*“Textbooks are written by other people that don’t have a clue what it actually feels like to be there and then. [...] So, the academics who think that they have that figured out, it’s just so far from reality. They’re doing their best, just like we are. But again, we don’t know what we’re doing and we’re on the ground in the middle of it so, we’re making it up as we go. And the textbooks that are going to be used long term are going to be written about the work that we’re doing right now. So, we’re ahead of the deal.” – Service Provider 1*

”

- 4) **Mentoring:** Many service providers indicated that they received on-the-job training from individuals who occupied the roles in the past and/or who had been providing these services for longer. This included job shadowing and going over organizational policies, procedures, manuals and job descriptions.

“

*“[Person X] definitely was in the role before anybody else, I think. So, before she left, I did shadow her for a bit. Figured out some of the tasks that I needed to do and how to do some of the paperwork and stuff like that.” – Service Provider 2*

*“It was like sitting down with a member of the head office and going through a policy and procedure manuals and guidelines of practice, things like that.” – Service Provider 3*

”

## STRENGTHS OF PS/SN SERVICES

Several strengths, benefits and impacts of the PS/SN roles emerged from the interviews. Each of the themes is described below in more detail.

### Shared Lived/ Living Experience

Working in overdose response settings can be very stressful, especially for peer workers who are not only affected by witnessing and reliving trauma, but also shared lived/ living experience and face similar structural vulnerabilities such as of poverty, homelessness, and stigma in their own lives [16–18]. One of the greatest strengths of the PS/SN services is that it is centered around the shared lived experience between the service providers and the service users. Many interviewees mentioned that there tends to be lack of trust in external services or supports, because they have been let down or felt judged in the past and it is a well-known fact that stigma is commonly encountered in health and social services [12,17,19–22].

As one service user indicated:

“

*“I like the way [the PS/SN services] were because of the work we do and, where most of us come from, [...] there’s been a lot of distrust with people in authority. [...] Or not people in authority but, social workers and counsellors and such. Just I know personally I’ve been let down all my life when I’ve dealt with these kinds of people. So, I’ve had zero trust with going to, like say, a counsellor or a social worker or anybody to talk to about any problems or issues that I have. So, finding somebody there that’s a peer of mine that has a bit of rough understanding of where I come from and my situation and stuff is way easier to talk to them, a lot easier to trust talking to them.” – Service User 2*

”

This idea of service providers with lived/ living experience being able to better understand the needs of peer workers was also echoed by several service providers:

“

*“I think it’s really important if there’s lived experience for a role in [...] systems navigation and peer support because to be able to put yourself in that person’s situation or if you’ve been in that situation, you might have ideas to help them and to support them or just know where their head space is at.” – Service Provider 2*

”

These quotes suggest that shared lived/living experience is an important cornerstone of these roles as it facilitates trust and greater feelings of safety.

## Compassionate Personality of the Service Providers

One of the key strengths of the PS/SN services at SOLID Outreach is the compassionate personality of the service providers. As one service user indicated, a person's success in the roles of a PS or SN are less about the knowledge they possess, and more about their personality:

“Yeah, a lot of stuff too you can't get from schooling or taking a course. A lot of it has to do with personality, right, like the way a person's personality is and how empathetic or sympathetic they are, right.” – Service User 2

Several personality traits were discussed and each one is highlighted below:

### Patience

Some service providers mentioned that patience is a very important characteristic for this role:

“Somebody that has the time to actually sit down with the folks in the community with lived experience. Somebody that [can] just take the time and be compassionate with the folks. And just take it one moment at a time. Because if we're dealing with folks in the community - sometimes they're having a good day. Sometimes they're having a bad day. Sometimes you can work with them. Sometimes you can't. And it's just [important] being patient. Patience is huge.” – Service Provider 2

### Non-judgemental

Many service users also suggested that it is important for them that the PS/SN is non-judgemental:

“Like I never choose bias or anything like that. I will never be like that. It doesn't matter to me who is who, really. I mean, I love and respect everyone on the planet for the most part. But especially in my circle.” – Service User 5

### Friendly nature

Another personality trait that was considered important for service providers to have is being friendly. Many service users commented on how they felt more comfortable and at ease with service providers that were friendly, and naturally gravitated towards them:

“[Service Provider] was always super friendly and outgoing and checking in with you, seeing how people are doing and, you know, just made me feel comfortable enough that, you know, if he could see that I was not doing good or having a bad day or something, he'd actually go out of his way to maybe call me later or something. Check with me to see how I was doing.” - Service User 2

## Honesty and Integrity

In addition to the above traits, it was deemed important for the service providers to be honest and be genuinely willing to help, rather than just providing services as part of their jobs. As one service user described:

“

*“But I know [Service Provider A] was a super guy. Was really good for other people as well. Always being there and always willing to lend an ear or helping hand or whatever he could do. [...] Definitely like a really [...] honest guy - he seemed like a really good hearted, honest person. There’s just something special about him that you felt like you could really trust him and, you know, and he’s just really genuine where you ‘cause whenever I talk with him, I felt like he was actually listening to me. And taking the time to hear what I was saying and, you know, think about a response back as opposed to just going oh, yeah, whatever, blah, blah, blah, right. Even though I didn’t know he was in a role of being a support worker of such. But yeah, just every time I talked with him, it seemed like he was really quite genuine about talking to me.” – Service User 2*

*“[Service Provider X] really cared, so she really put her heart and soul into it. [It is important to have] somebody that actually really cares. Like somebody who cares for people and is concerned about other people’s wellbeing. And just really love, basically somebody that actually really loves their job and cares about the people.” - Service User 2*

”

These quotes indicate that having a kind, honest and genuine person in the role of a service provider can help to facilitate trust and comfort among the service users. The quotes also suggest that being a good listener is an important trait for service providers to have.

These sentiments are in line with what the service providers' perceptions of service user needs. As one service provider mentioned, one’s integrity and ability to follow-through on their commitment is important:

“

*“And being consistent too and being reliable. If you say you’re going to do something follow through with it because so many people in our community have been let down by folks, other people, like other agencies. So to be actually, like, you know, a person of your word is really huge. Your integrity.” – Service Provider 2*

”

As shown by all the quotes above, having service providers with positive personality traits has been one of the biggest drivers for success and a key strength of the PS/SN services.

## BENEFITS AND IMPACT OF PS/SN SERVICES

### Sense of Community

Another strength of the PS/SN services is that it helps individuals feel cared for and facilitates a sense of community among them. As indicated in a previously published article [14], peer workers feel they are part of a “family” and this helps to create a positive work culture whereby everybody cares for each other. As one service user described:

“I think people feel better after they go to [for] peer support. At the very least they probably were able to get something off their mind and may be, you know, left with a sense of positivity because [...] they feel part of something. It helps people feel like they're a part of something. And I think that's really necessary in society today is to feel important. Feel loved.” – Service User 5

These feelings of being cared for and being “part of something” creates a sense of comfort and trust to reach out for help. As one service user mentioned:

“It'd be just like going to close friends or family. [...] SOLID for me really represents a community and a family that is behind us no matter what we are or who we are or what choices we make in our life. They seem to always have our back one hundred percent and they don't like to change who we are.” – Service User 3

From the perspectives of the service providers, being in these roles is an opportunity to give back to their community and care for others because that's how they would have liked to be cared for if the roles were reversed. In other words, the sense of community and kinship generates a genuine desire to improve the quality of life of other members of the community. This sentiment is described by several service providers:

“As someone who's ended up homeless and relying on complete strangers in a 12-step room, there's a duty that goes with that. When you can't take care of yourself and you reach out for help and somebody helps you that isn't gaining anything from it, if I don't continue that, [the cycle] breaks down. There was someone there to help me, that's why [I pay it forward].” – Service Provider 1

“My heart goes out to them. My gosh, I'd hate to be in a position like that. I have a really strong faith-based system inside me and I just do this stuff because it needs to be done. People need help. And so, if I'm doing okay, then, you know, I just [am] able to help out. So, that's the way I look at it. And then [...] I never ever think it's burdensome or any of that kind of stuff. It's just needs to be done.” – Service Provider 5

These quotes highlight the sense of responsibility and duty that peer workers have towards each other as well as wanting to help others. The quotes also speak to the idea of paying forward the help and support they have received in the past to others in the community who may still be struggling.

Just like service providers are working in these support roles because of their care and concern for members of their community and to pay forward on the help they once received, some service users also recounted situations where they have helped others in the community:

“

*“I [sit] in the overdose prevention clinic and convers[e] with various people that come in. And I might direct some of them to the people to talk to for housing and, you know, help someone get on social assistance or whatever. Or use my phone to help them, you know, look stuff up or whatever.” – Service User 1*

*“We’re a peer-based group that, you know, we all kind of work together with each other. And [...] we all kind of helped each other out and it’s all peer-to-peer, right. And that was part of the process. I just kind of thought that that’s [...] how things would work, like, everybody kind of look out for each other.” – Service User 2*

”

This notion of paying forward and caring for others creates a culture of support and further strengthens the kinship among peer workers. Many interviewees mentioned that helping others to improve their quality of lives is personally rewarding to them:

“

*“The fact is you’re helping someone get off the streets so their life might be a bit longer. I love to see them get into a place. It’s fun. It’s really fun to see it happen.” – Service Provider 5*

”

Overall, through the PS/SN services, a sense of community is fostered and allows each peer worker (service providers and service users) to feel that they have a “family” to fall back on and have a safety net that prevents them from feeling alone.

## Sense of Positivity and Feeling Cared For

Given the stressful and emotionally-draining aspects of peer work, it is important for peer workers to feel that they have people to lean on when they need. The PS/SN services enable people to off-load their challenges and share the burden of the trauma with someone that they trust. This is an important benefit of the services. As many service users indicated, having access to these services is reassuring and comforting for peer workers:

“

*“The job we have is really very severe sometimes. [...] Just knowing that there is somebody that is available to talk to if you need a bit of debriefing or just somebody like ‘hey, I just need somebody to talk to for a couple minutes or something’ then it definitely would be a good thing. – Service User 2*

”



Some service users indicated that having someone to talk to about their problems allows them to improve their mood, and feel light and positive. It also helps to create a sense of security. In the words of one service user:

“

*[Service Provider X] is really great because she will come around when she has the time [...] she'll come and make sure we're doing okay. Kind of get us in a good spirit sort of thing. She [...] comes in and sees how we're doing, uplifts us if we need it. 'Cause things like that can be contagious. She's like a cheerleader almost if I could say, you know, without sounding cliché or something. I noticed that people, including myself, it's a good way to keep people in a better mood and they feel more secure. I feel secure knowing that at least at work and even, not at work or things that are attached to work and home, I feel better or more secure, I guess I would say. - Service User 5*

”

For many peer workers, having this positivity and sense of meaning in their lives can have a profound impact since their lives are often characterized by loss. As some service providers described:

“

*“Sometimes [peer workers] think the entire world's against them. Society's against them. Police are against [them]. Everyone hates them, that kind of stuff, you know. And when I actually get something positive happening it's, like, 'Oh, shit. Really?' Yeah, they're shocked. There's shock. [Peer workers] face a lot of hurt. A lot of pain. These people [have] just been so downgraded and so looked down upon [for] so many years, they're just spent. It's just like - they're just out of energy for this. [And if you] get a place or you're cleaned up. You got clothes on. They're talking positive and it's a life changer. It really is.” – Service Provider 5*

*“I've had more than a few people come up and [say], 'nobody's even bothered to ask me so I'm just kind of moping around and feeling depressed and whatnot. And feel like nobody else really gives a shit'. So be[ing] there on a personable level makes a massive difference.” – Service Provider 3*

”

Some service providers also commented on the benefits and impact the services have had on the individuals they have supported. One service provider described that one of the individuals he supported is a happier person after having spoken to the service provider:

“

*And that directly affected [peer worker A's] work habits. He hasn't been late. He shows up for every shift. He's on time, and he's a happier person. – Service Provider 3*

”

Such positive impacts are not only felt by the individual that was supported but can have ripple effects to the rest of the community as well. As one service user described, individuals in a positive frame of mind are in a better position to help other people who use substances:

“*[Service Provider B] knew I was a member of the team too. He knew that my being in a good mood would definitely influence others. ‘Cause I have a good sense of influencing others too. If I feel down or whatever I will kind of go and be away from people so they don’t pick up on my scent, on my grouchiness.* – Service User 5”

As highlighted by the quotes above, having access to PS/SN services allows peer workers to feel reassured and comforted as they are able to off-load their pressures and stressors on someone they trust. This facilitates a sense of positivity and allows them to feel cared for, which, in turn, has community-wide ripple effects.

## Improved access to external services

Several service users and service providers indicated that having the PS/SN services increases access of external services for peer workers. This is because the individuals in these roles are able to assist them in getting any resources they require. As one service user mentioned:

“*I know that if I did have problems with getting identification or anything like that or housing or putting my name on a list or finding an organization, getting help with mental health, emotional health, anything like that, I know where to go. And it’s really close. I can go to them. I can go to my peers, my co-workers and my friends.* - Service User 5”

Some service users specifically commented on the over-complicatedness of accessing services and the bureaucracy which the Systems Navigator can help them navigate:

“*Just kind of having an advantage to navigating the bureaucracy, I guess. They’re very overcomplicated systems for addicts. They don’t understand. They get complicated, we get pissed off, we get frustrated and leave.*” – Service User 4

“*It’s nice to at least have like a sort of middleman. And that sort of cushion. And at least you know [...] possibly the wheels are turning. Yeah, I think everybody’s doing what they should be doing.*” – Service User 5”

These quotes indicate that the SN role is seen as a “middleman” and is beneficial to peer workers to navigate the bureaucratic systems or attaining basic resources, such as housing and photo IDs.

Given that many of these external systems are difficult to navigate for peer workers, either due to the bureaucracy and red tape around it, or the lack of awareness of the existence of these services, it is important for service providers to be familiar with the external resources. Thus, as described by one service user, one of the strengths of the PS/SN services was having service providers with the know-how of accessing external services:

“

*“People are coming from different walks - not the best situations either. So, a lot of people do need housing or need to know how to get their I.D. done or just little things like that that sometimes if you don't know how to do it, can be a real big runaround or bump into red tape. Whereas somebody that knows the ins and outs of all these little things can just say oh, well, here. You just need to phone this place and then they'll help you, right. So I think it's definitely something that's needed 'cause people are always needing just little things.”* – Service User 2

”

In addition to the familiarity with external systems and resources, it is important for service providers to be willing and able to get the right answers for the individuals they support. Because of service providers' resourcefulness and skillset, they are able to support individuals access resources that they would have otherwise not been able to access:

“

*“[...] Even just basic computer skills and whatnot that a lot of people-- they just don't even have the opportunity, especially coming from the street community and whatnot. They wouldn't have access to those kinds of skills.”* – Service Provider 3

*“[It's important to have] somebody who's willing to go over and beyond sometimes to help these people and get the answers that need answering, right. Instead of just going, 'oh, well, you can call this 1-800 number'. They might help you out, right? Instead [they] go and talk to a bunch of different people and get answers for you. If I had a question [or] from somebody else asking me a question, I'd ask [Service Provider X]. She would [say] 'oh, just give me half an hour, I'll go find that out'. And she'd be on her computer and the telephone and getting as much information as she could right away.”* – Service User 2

”

The quotes above indicate how service providers' willingness to use technology to get the right answers and their ability to connect peer workers to the needed resources can be impactful and appreciated by the service users.



## CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS OF PS/SN SERVICES

Several challenges and limitations of the PS/SN services emerged from the interviews. Each of the themes is described below in more detail.

### Newness of the Roles and Unpredictability of Work

One challenge of the PS/SN services that emerged from the interviews is that it is still fairly new (less than 2 years) and with the onset of COVID-19, several challenges were posed (more on this later). Thus, the individuals in these roles, the management and the service users are all still figuring out what services to provide, how to provide these services and how to keep records of services provided. As one service user indicated:

“*[The program] is kind of newish. I don't know. I think we're still figuring it out, trying to figure out what's going on and how to do it properly and what people need.*” - Service User 4

Also, as alluded to earlier, there is significant overlap between the two roles and it is difficult to distinguish who is responsible for what, at least it was initially when two separate roles existed. Although the organization has progressed to having multiple staff offering the PS/SN services rather than having two separate roles, there still seems to be some lack of clarity and structure to the services. This, as described by one service provider, can be attributed to the unpredictability of peer work which can make it challenging to create a structure for service provision:

“*The reality is that the jobs overlap so much that it's only to someone reading [the job descriptions] on paper that it can be separated. But the main problem, again, is the amount of separation on paper can't happen in reality without limiting the effectiveness of both people. People need help on the fly. They don't help on a nine-to-five schedule. You never know when a crisis is going to come up and we don't have the ability to [...] have people waiting to help people. It's one thing when we're able to schedule things ahead of time. Sometimes it's 80 hours. At one point, not long ago, we had three of our membership die over about a 10-day period. And everything we were doing as a whole, you know, you have to pull people out of other roles to have a service and get in touch with the family and our whole organization is on hold as we're helping out with these tasks. So, we have to be ready and we have to be fluid as a group and able to jump into the role in order to fix the problems as they come.*” – Service Provider 1

This point about unpredictability of peer work was further emphasized by another service provider who gave an example of the “grey areas” related to peer work:

“I think any kind of work with living experience, with peer work, with peer support work, there’s a lot of grey areas. [...] Like for example, trying to help someone secure safe - as crazy as it sounds - safe fentanyl. That doesn’t really come under the job description. But it’s kind of part of my job. It’s like making sure the drugs get tested. Making sure the testing’s trustworthy. And there’s a lot of little grey areas. Moving someone’s stuff into storage, it doesn’t really fall under a lot of those [job] descriptions, I don’t think.” – Service Provider 4

As indicated in these quotes, it is important for service providers to be flexible and provide services as needed, rather than having a set schedule or going strictly by job descriptions.

Another challenge, related to the newness of the roles, is that many peer workers are not aware of the existence of the PS/SN services. It is possible that because the program is fairly new, the word has not travelled within the staff at SOLID as yet. This point is highlighted by one service user:

“I wasn’t really aware of [the PS/SN services] it and I don’t know if any of my other co-workers were really aware that there’s actually specific people that are there for these roles.” – Service User 2

Sometimes, even when service users are aware of the existence of the PS/SN services, they are not aware of the scope of the services and this can lead to unrealistic expectations and frustrations. For example, as described by one service provider:

“I think that a lot of people think and even knowing our roles is important too, what our capacity is. Because I think our capacity got stretched thin and we were taking on way more than our capacity of roles in the community. I think we just need to figure out what we exactly do.” – Service Provider 2

As indicated in this quote, there seems to be lack of clarity around the scope of the services being provided, among both service users as well as the service providers themselves. Given the points mentioned earlier about the unpredictability of work and the grey areas, full clarity may never be obtained, but it is important to create as much clarity as possible to prevent unrealistic expectations and burnout.

## Personality Clashes

Another challenge of the PS/SN services is personality clashes between service providers and service users. Many service providers mentioned that some service users can get aggressive and even violent at times and maintaining a calm and composed nature when confronted can sometimes be challenging. In the words of some service providers:

““

*“Just trying to support people who are kind of like aggressive at times or just, you know, just people’s behaviours.” – Service Provider 2*

*“You’ll always have people with personality differences. And a lot of people that work within our organization, they’ve never had stable employment.” – Service Provider 4*

””

Some service providers even mentioned that certain service users can be ungrateful and do not appreciate all that the service providers do for them, and this can create frustration:

““

*“Those are the kind of things I get kind of frustrated about [...] We’re bending over backwards to help support people and, they’re just like yelling at you or they think that they deserve more out of you. And it’s like, [...] ‘I don’t have that capacity to give you everything you expect from me’. – Service Provider 2*

””

On the other hand, some service users also feel that there are certain service providers that they do not get along well with. Sometimes, these negative experiences with service providers can hinder them from reaching out for support. This point is highlighted by the quotes below:

““

*“I find sometimes they can all have different kind of ways of doing things or opinions. Where, you know, the peer supports they all have their own way they did something, you know what I mean? Which is effective in some ways. But you don’t always vibe with the specific person, right.” – Service User 4*

””

As indicated by this quote, individuals may not always get along with one specific person. As such, the service provision structure more recently adopted by SOLID Outreach is probably beneficial because it ensures that multiple people are providing PS/SN services rather than 1 specific person for each role, and gives the service users a choice on who they feel comfortable approaching for their support needs.

## Difficulty Establishing Trust

Even though shared lived experience is overall considered a driving factor for the success of the PS/SN services in that it allows service users to connect with the service providers and open up to them, establishing this trust can still take some time and in some cases, does not happen at all. There are many reasons that were mentioned during the interviews that explain why establishing trust can be challenging.

One reason was the fear of loss of jobs or having a negative reputation in the organization. Many service users mentioned that they sometimes feel uncomfortable going to their work peers for certain issues because of fear of losing their jobs.

“

*“We’re such a small group of people and the stuff we do deal with is pretty sensitive work and [...] really quite personal. If I say something, am I going to get in trouble or am I going to be reprimanded because I actually spoke up and said this or that. [...] For certain things it’s okay [to seek peer support], maybe, like just venting. Like, ‘oh, I had a bad day, dah, dah, dah’. But when it comes to really sensitive work matters, I wouldn’t feel comfortable talking about it with a peer. [...] When it comes to stuff like if you have a conflict in your life or you’re having some mental health issues or there’s something about work that’s really got you stressed or you’re really upset about or concerned about, right. Yeah, it’s not something I’d want to take to a peer. [...] I think it’d be difficult for people to feel comfortable to share their everything with a person that could, you know, maybe turn around and tell the boss or something.” – Service User 2*

”

This sentiment was also echoed by some service providers. In the words of one service provider:

“

*“There [are] different tiers of management within our organization. Some people get along great. Some people pretend they get along great. And so, I think really making it clear that what I’m doing is independent of SOLID, [...] anything that people talk to me about is going to be confidential. That’s the biggest challenge, I think.” – Service Provider 4*

”

As suggested by these quotes, peer workers may feel uncomfortable sharing the more personal and sensitive issues with their peers within the organization because of fear of loss of confidentiality as well as other repercussions such as being reprimanded or losing their jobs.

The other reason that came up was historical or systemic distrust based on previous experiences. Many service users mentioned that peer workers have often gone through a lot of trauma in their lives and have had very little to no positive outcomes. As such, they do not have trust in the system. In the words of one service user:

“

*“A lot of people coming from some really traumatizing scenarios and are dealing with really traumatizing issues and, like I said, have always been given nothing but the run around by other professionals and [there are] really huge trust issues. So, it’s really hard for most people to open up to somebody [...] if they’re not a hundred percent sure that this person is actually going to take them seriously for one. And be able to keep things confidential.” – Service User 2*

”

This sentiment was also shared by one service provider:

“

*“I mean, there are some that don’t take [the services] too seriously. I mean, there’s people that [will think] ‘blah, blah, blah’, till you actually get something positive on their plate. And they’re looking at it in a negative playing field basically what they had to deal with for so many years. It’s all negative. And so it’s hard.” – Service Provider 5*

”

These quotes indicate that previous negative experiences have resulted in distrust in the system and this often makes it difficult to establish trust among peer workers in the PS/SN services.

## Compassion Fatigue and Moral Distress

The interviews revealed that working in these roles can cause significant stress and compassion fatigue (distress caused by repeated exposure to trauma) [23] for service providers. Many service providers indicated being on call 24 hours a day, working 80-hour work weeks and losing sleep over the trauma of others and their own. As one service provider mentioned:

“*Yeah, it’s very [stressful]. I’ve lost so much sleep over some of the things just because it’s stressful. Did this person actually get in there? Are they okay? Are they going to lose their place? I don’t know. It can be stressful, just ‘cause you’re taking somebody’s livelihood into your hands almost. They’re coming to you and they’re at the lowest - sometimes at the lowest of lows in their life. They’re homeless. They’re on the streets. They’re using. And nothing’s going their way.*” – Service Provider 2

As indicated in this quote, service providers feel a lot of pressure because, as mentioned, they are “taking somebody’s livelihood into [their] hands” and this can be extremely stressful.

Similarly, many service providers indicated that at times they want to be able to do more for the people they support but are unable to do so, either because of lack of time and capacity, or lack of resources. This powerlessness felt by individuals due to their inability to act in a particular manner despite knowing the right course of action is termed “moral distress” [24–27]. Many studies have indicated that moral distress can lead to severe health consequences including anxiety, depression, demoralization, and workplace alienation [28]. In the words of one service provider:

“*I want [service users] to know that I’m trying my best within my capability. But then they expect more from me and I don’t have that capacity. Yeah, so that’s the hardest thing, you know, you want to do more but [there are] limitations of some things. Like time and resources sometimes.*” – Service Provider 2

## Challenges due to COVID-19

The onset of COVID-19 has introduced several challenges to the provision of PS/ SN services. Evidence from the BC Coroners Service shows that illicit drug toxicity deaths have been on the rise since the onset of COVID-19 and the implementation of physical distancing measures in March 2020 [29]. Furthermore, the workload for peer workers providing outreach and mobile overdose response has increased drastically due to closures and reduced hours of organizations servicing PWUS [30,31]. This increased workload in the wake of dual public health emergencies has led to high rates of burnout among peer workers. As mentioned by some service providers:



“*[There is] high burnout rate, especially with the overdose crisis and COVID combined. I’m sure you hear that all the time. But [...] real high burnout rate. That’s a real hard one for me. It’s like being able to identify when someone’s really struggling. Because it’s their income as well, right, so they’re afraid of losing their income. Balancing that with self-care, that’s a real challenge. It’s a challenge for me too personally.*” – Service Provider 4

“*The problem was, and everybody faced it across the planet as far as I can tell, but when COVID came in we limited the face-to-face. At SOLID we doubled or tripled the size of our team and the amount of staffing we were providing around town. And the number of problems for individuals, I think, likely went up a little bit. But it made it really difficult to actually have a sit down [and] chat with people.*” – Service Provider 1

With the increase in stressors associated with COVID-19, there has been an increased demand for PS/SN services, which has in turn led to an increase in the workload for staff and managers providing these services. As one service user indicated:

“*Well, the demand is a lot more for [PS/SN services] but, like, a lot of people [are] backing down. It’s a very complicated mess.*” – Service User 4

As indicated in this quote, there has been some staff turnover in relation to COVID-19. This was also insinuated by some service providers:

“*Right now just kind of [because of] COVID, there’s been some internal changes with staff upstairs, so some people left. Some people are new. [...] I think COVID screwed a lot of shit up and we’re just like trying to fill roles and so a lot of things may have been missing in the last little while. But we’re trying to get them back up and running.*” - Service Provider 2

The increased demand for PS/SN services and coping with staff turnover has been quite challenging for the service providers to managers, especially since they already had their full plates due to their involvement in setting up emergency housing and harm reduction facilities in hotels and transitioning individuals who were homeless into these facilities. In the words of one service provider:

“*So we were, you know, just overstretched in our own physical presence as well. So, we’re having to multitask. And then the people are not even in the building when we’re talking to them. So that was difficult initially.*” – Service Provider 1

Overall, the onset of COVID-19 has posed several challenges to the delivery of PS/SN services due to the increased emotional burden on peer workers and the higher staff turnover, which has, in turn, led to an increased workload for PS/SN service providers.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## STRUCTURE OF SERVICE PROVISION

As alluded to earlier, the PS/SN services has gone through multiple structures including having two separate roles for the provision of PS and SN services, having a combined role, as well as offering the PS/SN services as part of management duties.

For future direction, many interviewees recommended:

### Designated staff members for services (combined):

These designated staff for the combined PS/SN services must be solely responsible for this work rather than provide PS/SN services as part of the many services they are involved in, as is the case at present. This would prevent burnout among service providers and ensure that there's more consistency in service delivery and follow through.

Many service users indicated that there should be at least **2 or 3 different service providers** so that service users have the choice to approach providers that they are most comfortable with.

### External service provider

Some service users expressed concern about opening up to peers within the organization about some of their personal issues because of fear of losing their jobs and/or having a negative image within the organization. These service users recommended having service providers external to the organization for some sensitive issues that peer workers may not be comfortable sharing with their work colleagues. Given the importance of shared lived/ living experience of substance use to establish trust and comfort between the service users and service providers, the external service provider should be someone with this lived/ living experience, ideally hired in a centralized provincial capacity, such as through the BC Centre for Disease Control.

Note: The external service provider(s) would not replace the designated service providers within the organization, rather they would be available for more sensitive and personal issues which the peer workers are not comfortable sharing with their work colleagues.

## CREATING A CULTURE OF SUPPORT IN THE ORGANIZATION

Service providers as well as service users indicated that providing PS/SN services is not one person's job; everyone in the community should be involved to share the workload. To that end, they recommended that efforts be made to build capacity of all peer workers to help each other and provide peer-to-peer services rather than solely depending on individuals in the designated positions to provide these services. This would help to create a culture of support and would be more sustainable in the long run. It would also prevent burnout among service providers.

## MORE TRAINING

Many service providers indicated that they did not undergo formal training to prepare them for their roles. Own education and lived experience have been the primary sources of knowledge for the service providers. It would be recommended that some kind of standardized basic training be provided to all service providers to ensure that they all have the baseline knowledge needed for these roles and that there is consistency in service provision.

**Practical and situational training:** Many service providers recommended having practical and situational trainings that would lay out step-by-step how they should support peer workers for each of their potential needs. Specifically, this would involve identifying prominent needs and going over associated procedures of support. Creating handouts and templates would also ease the service provision, for example, a handout on how to obtain a government issued ID card, template of a reference letter for housing, etc.

**Familiarizing with external systems:** One of the challenges faced by service providers was the lack of familiarity with external resources or systems. Relationship-building with external service providers such as housing agencies, etc. is necessary for easier access to these services.

**Regular debriefing meetings among service providers:** These would facilitate knowledge sharing, identification of tough and unique cases, and seeking support from each other.

## INCREASED AWARENESS ABOUT PS/SN SERVICES

There is a need to increase awareness about the existence of the PS/SN services. Service users recommended different ways of increasing awareness, including posters and announcement during staff meetings. In the words of one service user:

“*“Maybe at every meeting make sure that it's talked about. Maybe we can hand out some things like a loose-leaf paper, just kind of give everybody a copy of [that and] kind of say, 'if this or that happens then you can call this person or if you want to talk about [x].'”* – Service User 5

# CONCLUSION

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The PS/SN services have had a positive impact on the peer workers at SOLID Outreach since its implementation. Some of the strengths of these services include the accessibility and acceptability of the services, the shared lived/ living experience which facilitates understanding and trust between the service providers and service users, and the positive personality traits of the service providers. The PS/SN services have had a tremendous impact on the service users as well as the community at large by improving access to external resources, facilitating a sense of community, fostering feelings of being cared for, and overall positivity. Some challenges of the PS/SN services include personality clashes, historic and systemic distrust, compassion fatigue, staff turnover due to added pressures of COVID-19 and increased workload on service providers. Some recommendations for improvement include having designated staff members in the PS/SN roles as well as an external service provider for more sensitive issues that peer workers may not feel comfortable sharing with their peers. There is also a need for additional training for staff in these roles as well as increased awareness about the PS/SN services. Overall, the PS/SN services are needed and very impactful and should continue to be offered at SOLID Outreach as well as other organizations that hire peer workers across BC.

# POST SCRIPT

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The PS/SN services have expanded substantially since this evaluation was completed. SOLID Outreach has implemented the following:

- A worker from the Ministry of Social Development is available to come to the SOLID office and support peer workers based on demand.
- A nurse works with the outreach team and provides services needed by the peer workers.
- SOLID is opening up their courtyard to allow peer workers to access services, including access to two senior staff who are available to chat five days a week.
- Have hired two individuals with counselling experience on a full-time basis to work in the consumption services.
- Have hired a consultant to develop an up-to-date service guide for both outreach and in-reach referrals.
- SOLID is facilitating access to external supports such as private counseling, hypnotherapy, and massage therapy, by setting up appointments, providing funding, etc.

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