

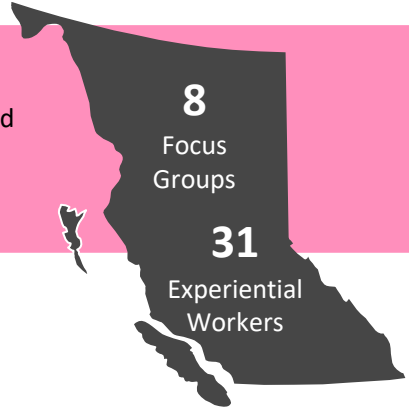
Research Brief: 'It's an Emotional Roller Coaster... But Sometimes It's Fucking Awesome':

Meaning and motivation of work for peers in overdose response environments in British Columbia

Pauly, Bernadette (Bernie), Mamdani, Zahra, Mesley, Lacey, McKenzie, Sophie, Cameron, Fred, Edwards, Denice, Howell, Amy, Knott, Michael, Scott, Tracy, Seguin, Ryan, Greer, Alissa M, Buxton, Jane A. "It's an Emotional Roller Coaster... But Sometimes It's Fucking Awesome': Meaning and Motivation of Work for Peers in Overdose Response Environments in British Columbia." *International Journal of Drug Policy* 88: 103015. URL (November 9, 2020)

Background: Working in overdose response environments can be stressful, with lasting emotional and mental health effects. The Peer2Peer project aims to identify, implement and evaluate peer-led support interventions for experiential workers in overdose response settings. There is limited knowledge about the personal meaning and benefits that experiential workers derive from their work. This knowledge is necessary to develop strategies that can increase positive work experiences for experiential workers, and further strengthen commitment and support for their positions.

A new research paper published in the *International Journal of Drug Policy* in November 2020 describes three themes regarding the meanings which serve as motivators for experiential workers to continue working in overdose response settings in BC.



Methods:

8 focus groups were conducted at the two pilot organizations – SOLID Outreach Society in Victoria and RainCity Housing in Vancouver and Fraser Regions. The research sites span across three out of five of BC's Health Authority regions. A total of 31 experiential workers participated in the focus groups.

Findings:

1

A SENSE OF PURPOSE FROM HELPING OTHERS

The knowledge that experiential workers contribute meaningfully to the lives of others fosters a sense of purpose that their work matters. It also helps them make sense of and ascribe meaning to their own hardships. It is through this that they lead and contribute to meaningful solutions that seek to change the course of the overdose epidemic.



“[I] get to be able to do something and it makes me actually feel like I'm useful. Makes you feel like all the shit that I've done in my life wasn't for nothing”

2

BEING AN INSPIRATION TO OTHERS

The work of experiential workers is a meaningful reminder of their own their own journey in substance use and represents a possibility of a better future for others. They are also a symbol of hope and inspiration for other PWUDs. Further, they represent a force against the stigmatization of substance use, and take pride in representing organizations that support this mandate.



“We're role models 'cause [PWUD] can look at us and say, 'I knew that person on the street when they were [...] living in a tent and just sticking needles in their arm every day. And look at this person now. I mean, they still do dope but, you know what, they're doing okay'.”

3

SENSE OF BELONGING

Experiential workers describe a profound commitment to create a safe, protective, non-judgmental space for the individuals they serve. They derive this same sense of support and protection from their colleagues with shared experiences.



“It's nice to have a safe space where you can talk [...] as freely as you want to. And everybody has some kind of addiction experience and it's just like walking into a warm hug. Everybody's there to support you and understands what you've been through.”

Conclusion: Despite the stressful nature of their work, experiential workers enthusiastically describe the meaning and benefits they derive from working in overdose response settings. These gains may help to protect workers from the emotional harms associated with stressful work as well as the stigma of substance use. Recognizing the importance of experiential work and its role in the lives of PWUD may bolster support for these positive aspects for experiential work.