Questions for Agencies

SYSTEMS OF POWER AND RESISTANCE MOVEMENTS

• What values guide your work? Where do these values come from? Why are they important? How do you practice them with the communities you serve? With your non-peer staff? With peers?

• How does your agency relate to the social service system? Do your staff and supervisors know how the system perpetuates social oppression? What are you doing to minimize the harm of the social service system? What are you doing to support your communities in meeting their own needs, in their own way?

• How do you identify power at your agency? Do you notice white supremacy and racism, colonialism, classism, cisheteropatriarchy, and ableism? Do you interrupt them? How? What material resources have you committed to this process? For example, are you willing to re-train or, if necessary, fire supervisors or non-peer staff who hold damaging beliefs or behave in oppressive ways? Are you willing to abandon practices that are harmful to service users and/or peer staff?

• What are your connections with social movements arising from and led by the communities you serve? Do you show interest and/or support for the individuals involved and/or for the movements themselves? If yes, how do you share resources with these social movements? Do these movements inform the values of your organization? Your daily practices? How?

DEFINITIONS OF PEER WORK

• How does your agency define peer work? Where does your definition come from? Is it written by peer workers? Or does it come from somewhere else?

• What do non-peer staff think about peer work? Do they understand it? Are they prepared to respect and learn from peers? Or do they feel threatened by peer workers? What kinds of discriminatory ideas do your non-peer staff have? How can you assess them? How can you address them?

• What is the responsibility of an agency to ensure that non-peers are educated about peer work? How can you make this education relevant and meaningful?

We recommend that any agencies invested in truly supporting peer workers use the questions on the following pages as a guide to start deep conversations – and, from these conversations, begin to make concrete change.

GOVERNANCE

- What is the role of the communities you serve in making decisions about the direction of your organization? Are they central? If so, how? If not, why not?

- How is your agency governed? Do you rely on a hierarchical model? If so, why? Is this the only way? How can you integrate more lateral decision-making? Collective models?

- Who holds supervisory and/or managerial roles at your organization? How did they get these roles? Is your organization primarily white? Cisgender? Straight? Non-disabled? Does everyone have post-secondary education? Is this representative of your communities? Do people from and *still connected to* the communities you serve have decision-making power at the higher levels?

- Are there peer workers and/or members of the community you serve on your Board? If so, are they in tokenized positions, or do they have real decision-making power? What percentage of the Board do they comprise? Why?

- How is your agency evaluated? Whose work is assessed? Are there annual evaluations of the ED? Board members? Supervisors? Who conducts these evaluations? Are there exit interviews for individuals who leave the organization? If so, who runs these interviews? What do you do with the results?

FUNDING

- What kind of funding do you receive or seek for peer work? What are the restrictions? Can you work around, or push back against them? How? If you are being forced to set up exploitative labor conditions, is the funding worth it? Why?

- Who makes decisions about how funding is sought? About how funding is used? About reporting back to funders? Who can support you in making these decisions strategically to support the practices of peers?

- What steps are you taking to not rely on government funding to support peer workers? How are you diversifying your funding streams? If you have private donors, how can you be sure they are not unduly influencing your work?

JOB POSTINGS

- What are you looking for when you hire a peer worker? What type of skills, values and experiences are you seeking? How do you communicate this in you job posting?

- How do you post for your job? What is included in the posting? Is it accurate to the role the person will take on?

- What do you require from your potential employees? Do you research candidates on social media platforms or elsewhere on the internet? Do you ask for criminal record checks? Why? What information are you looking for? What are other ways you can assess someone's suitability for a role?
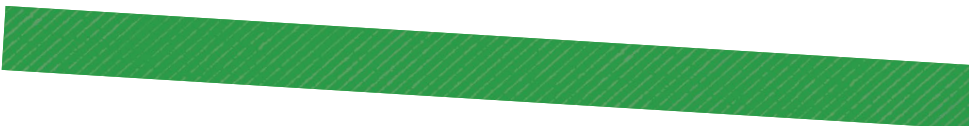
INTERVIEWS

- What do you ask at a job interview? Do you prioritize peoples' skills and abilities? Is there a focus on "boundaries" and "self care"? What are you trying to discover when you ask these questions? Can you determine this in another way? Is this appropriate information for you to ask for or have?

- How do you judge potential hires? Are you relying on how well they fit with existing agency culture and practice? If so, who does this serve? Do you seek out "gossip" or ask about "reputation"? From whom? How do you differentiate between lateral violence and community accountability? Who can assist you in this?

- Do you ask potential peer employees what they need in order to be successful? If so, do you provide it to them once they are hired? How?
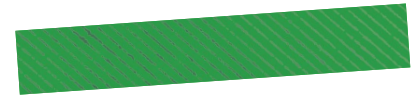
COMPENSATION AND BENEFITS

- How much are peers paid? Are they paid less than non-peer staff? Are they paid differently than non-peer staff (e.g., cash vs. direct deposit)? If so, why? Do peers get a say in determining how they get paid, as well as how much?

- How do you decide what tasks peers should be paid for? When are peers who are working in their own communities and/or out of their homes (e.g., at satellite sites) "off the clock"? Who gets to decide?

- What kinds of support are available to peer workers? Do they have a comprehensive benefits package? If not, how do you ensure that they get the care they need from practitioners outside the organization?

JOB SECURITY AND ADVANCEMENT

- Do you see peer work as a potentially permanent and secure position? Or do you only hire peers for short-term contracts? Who makes these decisions? Why?

- What kinds of training and personal development opportunities are available to peer workers? Are they relevant to peers' needs? How do you know?

- How do peer workers transition into other jobs and/or seek higher pay and more job security? What is the pathway? Who can access it? How do you ensure that there is equity and transparency in this process?

WORKPLACE REPRESENTATION

- How do peer workers give criticism and feedback to the agency and/or assert their collective rights? Are they unionized? If so, does the union actually understand and represent them? Or does it present a barrier? What other models of political representation are possible?

- Are peer workers at your agency connected to peers at other agencies? Do you recognize and respect cross-agency issues?

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENTS

- Does your agency occupy Indigenous land? If so, how are you working to return that land? How are you working to become accountable to your treaty responsibilities? Who gives you guidance on this?

- How accessible and safe is your built environment? Do you have consistent COVID safety practices? How do you ensure people are safe from physical violence? Are some workers subject to greater risks of illness and/or injury than others? Why?

- Can peer workers access all the same spaces at your agency that non-peers can? Do they have keys? Fobs? IDs? Do they have email addresses? If not, why not?

- Who "belongs" at your agency? Are some people scrutinized or seen as "out of place" in particular rooms and/or on certain floors? Do you work in an agency where there are clear hierarchies in the floorplan (e.g., managers on higher floors, peers on lower floors)? Why?

SATELLITE AND OUTREACH WORK

- How do you support satellite workers? How do you respond when issues of safety emerge for them? How do you compensate them? What benefits do you offer? What do you do if they have needs "off the clock"?

- How do you support outreach workers? Do they have warm jackets and good shoes? Cell phones with adequate data? Rolling bags? Do you have a vehicle they can use?

SUPERVISION AND OUTREACH WORK

- Do you have a supervision philosophy? If so, where does it come from? Who supports you in ensuring you are aligned with it in your work? If you do not have a philosophy, why? Who can support you in articulating one? Who can assist you in enacting it?

- Does your supervision practice differ for peers than for non-peers? If so, how, and why? Are there questions that you would ask peers that you would never ask non-peers? Why?

- Do you subject peers to greater scrutiny than non-peers? Do you subject some peers to greater scrutiny than others? Who? How? Why?

- What expectations do you have of peers? How clearly are they communicated? How do they relate to your supervision philosophy and your definition of peer work? How do you deal with an issue that emerges with a peer? What kinds of accountability practices do you have? Why?

- How does your agency define "professionalism"? Why is it defined this way? Does your definition focus on how people dress and speak? On punctuality and document-keeping? Or is it about ethical practices? Who gets to decide which of your expectations are meaningful and which present barriers to peers?