




# MOVING THE DIAL ON:

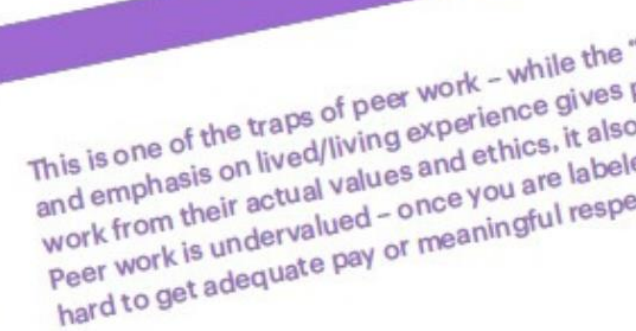
An e-learning event hosted by  Community-Based Research Canada  
Recherche partenariale du Canada

## Peer Support Work and "Escaping the Maze"

With Griffin Epstein, Lindsay Jennings,  
Madelyn Gold, Marc-Andre Hermanstytne, Maria  
Scotton and Suwaida Farah



"A peer is somebody that is a peer of *the community*, not a peer of *your organization*. This is where organizations get confused. Yeah, they're doing the work, they're bringing education about your organization, but they're doing it in a way they know the community needs." — Peer worker



This is one of the traps of peer work – while the "peer" title and emphasis on lived/living experience gives people space to work from their actual values and ethics, it also constrains them. Peer work is undervalued – once you are labeled a "peer," it is hard to get adequate pay or meaningful respect.

**JUNE 22, 2023 12PM-2PM ET**



Community-Based Research Canada  
Recherche partenariale du Canada

[www.communityresearchcanada.ca](http://www.communityresearchcanada.ca)



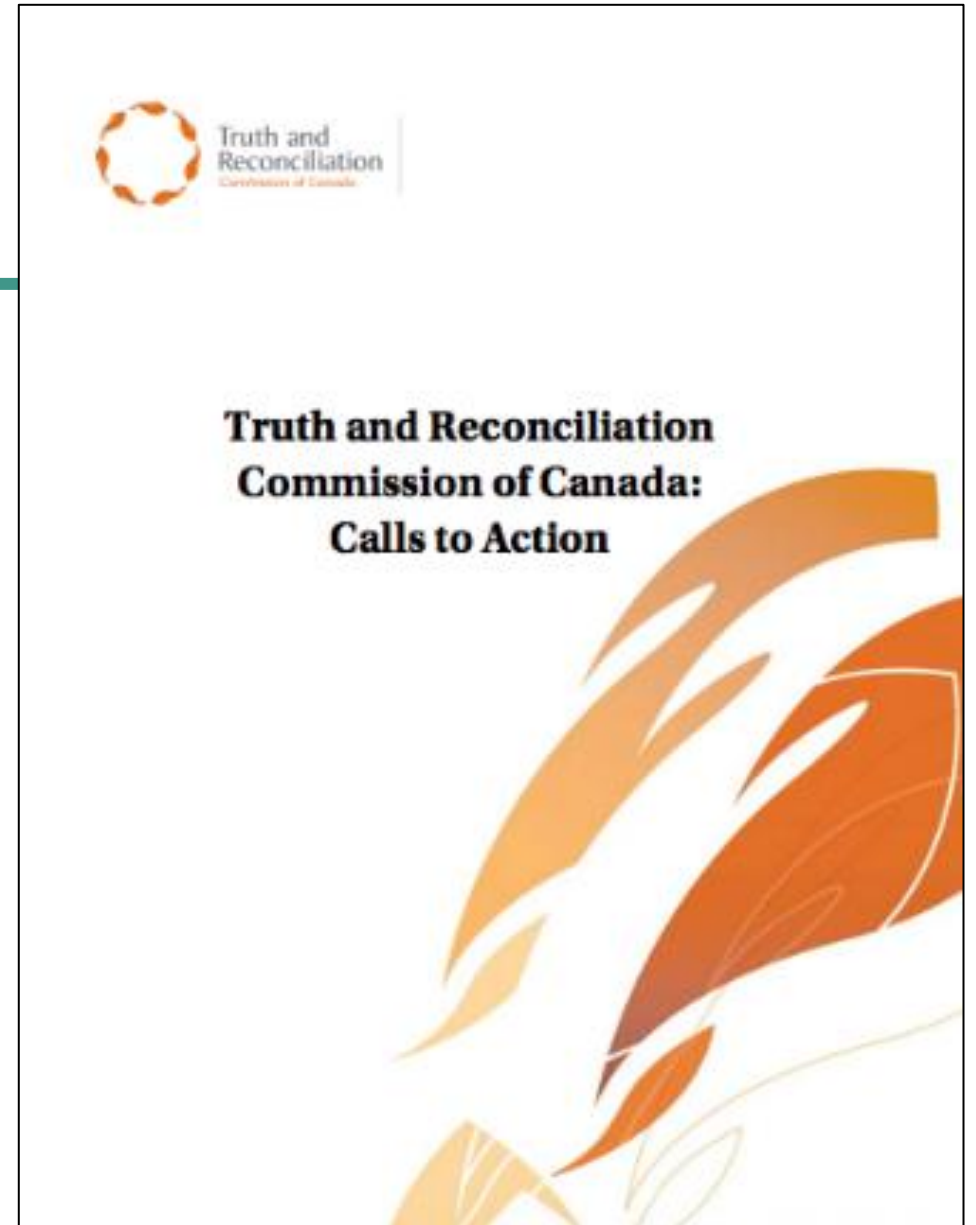
@CbrcResearch



Community Based Research Canada

# Call to Action #9

We call upon those who can effect change within the Canadian health-care system to recognize the value of Aboriginal healing practices and use them in the treatment of Aboriginal patients in collaboration with Aboriginal healers and Elders where requested by Aboriginal patients



# Agenda

---



## Opening



## Webinar

Presentation

Q&A period



## Live Discussion

Breakout rooms

Large group  
debrief



## Closing

# Presenters

---

## Supporting Peer Work

**Griffin Epstein**

they/them

**Lindsay Jennings**

she/her

**Madelyn Gold**

she/her

**Andre Hermanstyne**

he/him

**Maria Scotton**

they/them

**Suwaida Farah**

she/her

**Michael Nurse**

he/him or they/them



# Escaping the maze

Findings, recommendations, and strategies  
from the Supporting Peer Work (SPW) project

# Supporting Peer Work (SPW)

---

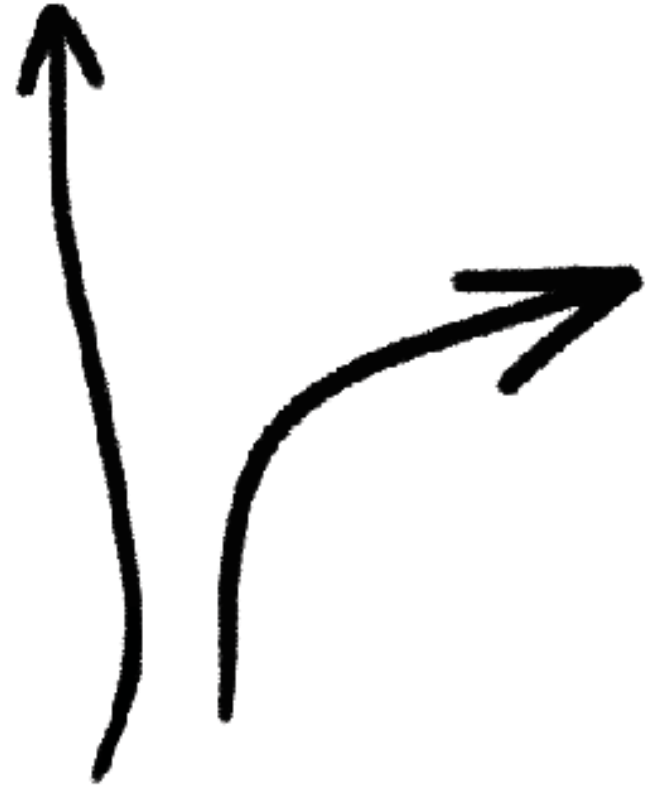
SPW is a **community-guided research** project funded by a grant from the Canadian government to study the working conditions of **peers in low barrier social service agencies** during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. It is a partnership between George Brown College (GBC), Working for Change (WfC) and the Toronto Drop-In Network (TDIN), steered by a committee of experts in community work from lived/living experience. The core team includes:

- Andre Hermanstyne
- Griffin Epstein
- Lindsay Jennings
- Madelyn Gold
- Maria Scotton
- Suwaida Farah
- Michael Nurse
- Dawnmarie Harriott
- Julia Walter



# Agenda

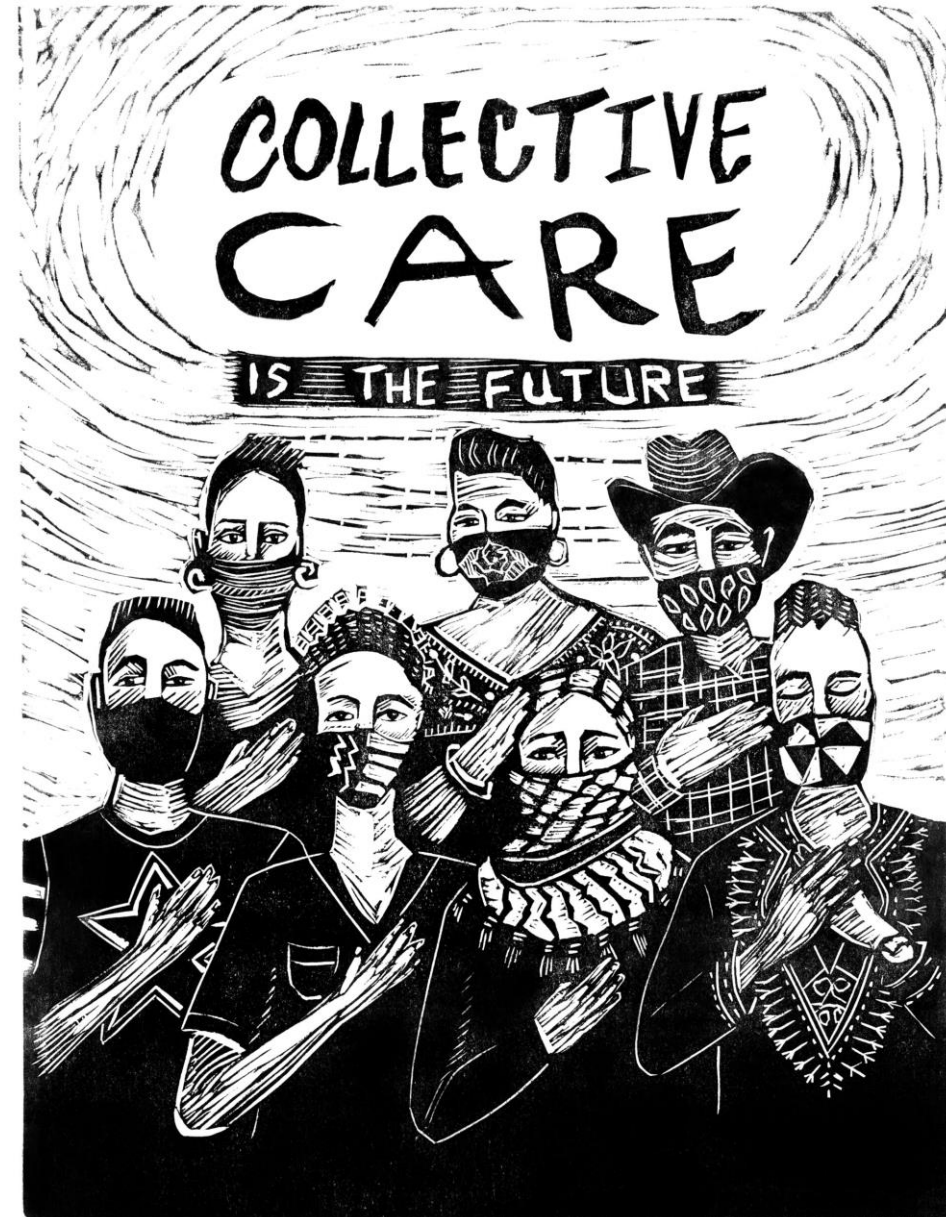
- Opening
- Supporting Peer Work (SPW)
- Research findings
- Demands and next steps
- Question and answer
- Breakout groups
- Report back
- Closing





# Access needs

- Audio/visual access
- Recording and consent
- Any other access needs?



# Treaty responsibilities

---



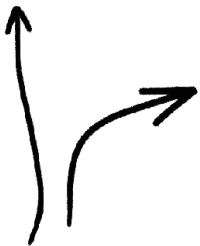
SPW works on the occupied territories of the nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Wendat, and the Mississaugas of the Credit River. We are accountable to The Dish with One Spoon and Two Row Wampum, treaties which are the true laws of this land. SPW aspires to be accountable to our treaty responsibilities in everything we do as individuals, and as research community.

Early in our time together, we watched and reflected on the video on the following slide, which helped us orient to the land that is now called Toronto. We hope it is also helpful for you.



# Consider...

- Whose land are you on?
- What are your treaty responsibilities on that land?
- How can you be sure you are living up to them and/or working against colonialism in all that you do?



# Making space together


---

- What can you do to take care of yourself as you hear difficult content about oppression and resistance?
- How can you support each other when you talk about tough issues in small groups?
- What agreements can we come to as a temporary community?



# Key terms

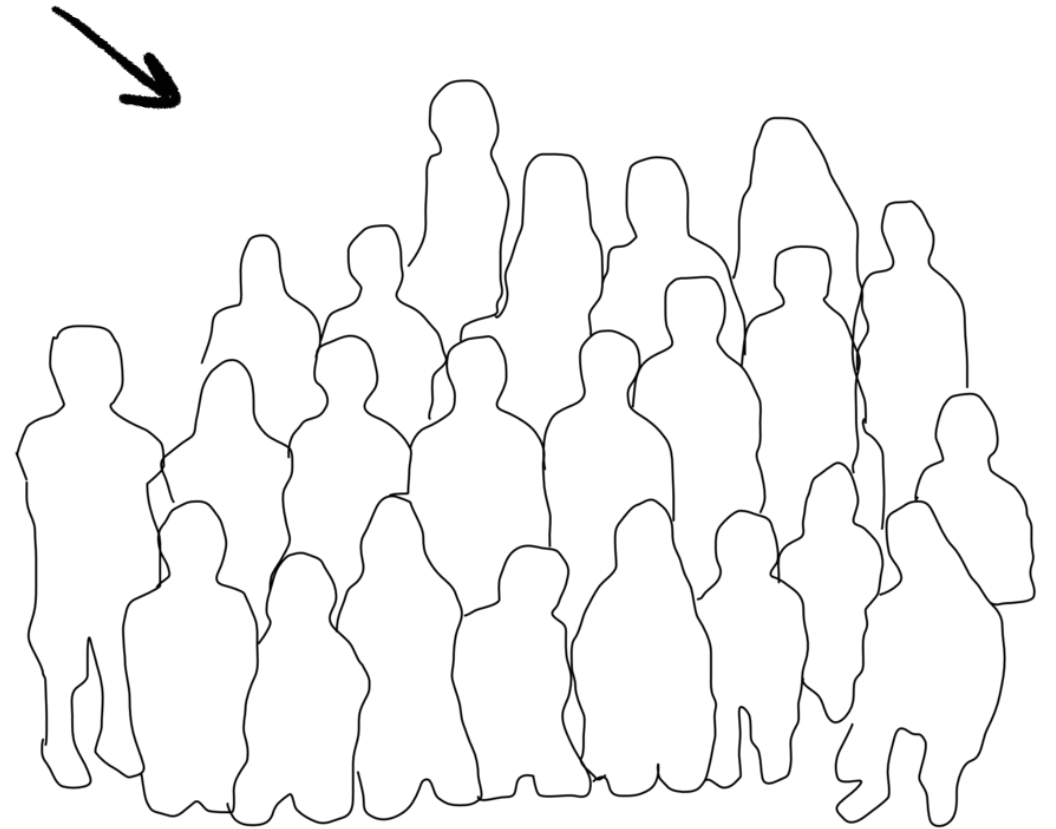
---

- 
- **Peer work:** Any social service position reserved for people who share lived/living experiences with the communities they serve, including those that go by other names. We know “peer” is a loaded term and support all efforts to develop more accurate and empowering language. At the same time, we found that people with different job titles still faced discrimination based on their status as current or former service users. We chose to use this word in our research because it captured shared practices and shared struggles.
  - **Community-guided research:** A strategy for reducing the harms of academic work by making sure that people whose experiences are being researched have control over how their data is collected, analyzed, and used. Ideally, community-guided research turns into action for change.
  - **“Low-barrier” social service agency:** A non-profit like a drop-in or Community Health Centre that provides survival resources to **structurally oppressed** people and communities. These organizations are often the most accessible spaces within the social service system, but are still shaped by **colonialism, capitalism, white supremacy, cisheteropatriarchy, and ableism**. For more on how we use these terms and concepts, please see our research documents.

# We came together with a shared lens

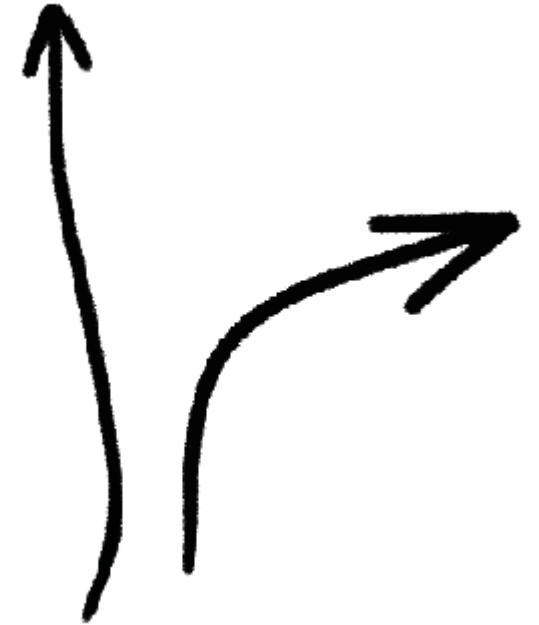
---

- Peer work is a transformative and necessary practice that is different from other types of social service.
- Peers face exploitation and oppression at non-profit agencies.
- The problems peers experience at work are not because they lack “training.”



# To do our research, we...

- Invested in our relationships as a core team.
- Paid attention to our treaty responsibilities.
- Made decisions by consensus.
- Collaboratively wrote outreach and interview scripts.
- Prioritized the needs, desires, and insights of peer workers.
- Compensated all interviewees equitably.





# Interview demographics\*

---



## Peer interviewees (35 people)

- Our peer interviewees were relatively racially diverse (29% white, 26% Indigenous, 11% Black, 14% racialized but not Black or Indigenous).
- A little over half (57%) were cisgender women; the rest were cisgender men (23%), and trans, non-binary and/or gender-diverse people (8%).
- 80% were working as peers at the time of interview.
- We did not ask about specific lived experiences, but most identified as current or former criminalized drug users; many were or had been unhoused; several identified as disabled; some had experience as sex workers; and many had survived incarceration.

## Supervisor interviewees (16 people)

- The supervisors we interviewed were majority white (81%), and mostly cisgender men (44%).
- 87% were working in supervisory and/or managerial positions over peers at the time.
- Some identified their own lived and/or living experience but did not share specifics.
- Many identified as leaders in the field, but generally were much more concerned than the peer interviewees about being identifiable in the final report.

\*Disaggregated and decontextualized



# Findings



# 1) Peers and supervisors define “peer work” differently

---

- Despite saying they support the unique contributions of peers, supervisors think of peer work as a “learning opportunity” or “stepping-stone” to “mainstream employment.”
- Peers see their work very differently. Peers challenge oppressive practices and lead new initiatives. They resist the “gatekeeping” of social services by “cultivating community.” For some Indigenous workers, peer work is how they “decolonize care.”



“A peer is somebody that is a peer of *the community*, not a peer of *your organization*. This is where organizations get confused. Yeah, [peers are] doing the work...but they’re doing it in a way they know the community needs.”

Peer Worker

## 2) Peers work precarious positions, which supervisors claim is unavoidable

- The pandemic has increased the risk and intensity of peer work, but not the pay. Almost all **peers** we spoke to worked underpaid and insecure contract jobs with no benefits.
- Most **supervisors** acknowledged this inequity but said their “hands are tied” by funders. Others justified low pay as necessary so peers could receive social assistance, even though many workers are not on OW or ODSP. Some supervisors said low pay was just an unavoidable reality of poverty and “better than nothing.”

“It’s a more desperate workforce that’s willing to do jobs that many people are not willing to do at a lower rate.”

Supervisor



### 3) Peers face discrimination, which supervisors justify as “support”

---


- Many peers experience disrespect and scrutiny from non-peers, with Black peers facing the highest levels of surveillance and distrust. Most peers are asked intrusive questions about “self-care,” while being denied the resources to meet their actual needs.
- Many supervisors justify their scrutiny of peers as necessary, suggesting that peers’ need “case management” and other types of social work support rather than better pay and working conditions.




“I am a harm reduction worker. We were literally hired to give knowledge about substance use. Not serve food, not clean toilets. It seems these jobs that nobody else is willing to do fall on peers.”

**Peer Worker**

## ~~4) The physical spaces of “low barrier” agencies are unwelcoming or hostile to peers~~



- Peers are often forced to work in basements or on lower floors. They get locked out of front doors and offices. Black and Indigenous workers reported the greatest barriers to accessing agency space and the most scrutiny in them.
  - Peers are also subjected to more grief, loss, violence at work, and greater exposure to COVID-19 than any other workers. Outreach and offsite workers, especially those at satellite sites, face the most danger with the least support.
- 

“If I need that money, which I do, I just put up with the risk of getting sick.”

Peer Worker

“Why am I getting treated like I'm a criminal in my own workspace?”

Peer Worker

# 5) Supervisors hold peers to oppressive standards

---

- Supervisors hire peers for their community knowledge, then claim they lack the “professionalism” to succeed. For many supervisors, “professionalism” means *appearing* to not use drugs, being punctual, and not struggling with paperwork.
- Research shows that these types of “professional” standards judge a person’s access to economic and social stability rather than the quality of their work. They are known to be racist, classist, ableist, and colonial.



“[The organization is] predominantly very cis, white, straight and those are the people that [are] getting promoted”

Peer Worker



“The truth is, if I got paid what I’m worth, I don’t think I would have a problem attending.”

Peer Worker

## 6) Peers sometimes oppress each other to get ahead

---

- In these working conditions, peers often compete with and police each other to get better work. Workers with more social power sometimes described themselves as “not like other peers” and/or made negative or insulting comments about their colleagues with more oppressed identities. Black and Indigenous peer workers shared the most stories of oppression from their colleagues.
- Supervisors said that these dynamics between peers made them “uncomfortable,” but admitted they sometimes “played into the hiring process.”



“The peers stick together as much as they can...but because there is not the pay equity and because there are not a lot of full-time permanent peer jobs, people are stepping on each other to get ahead.”

Peer Worker



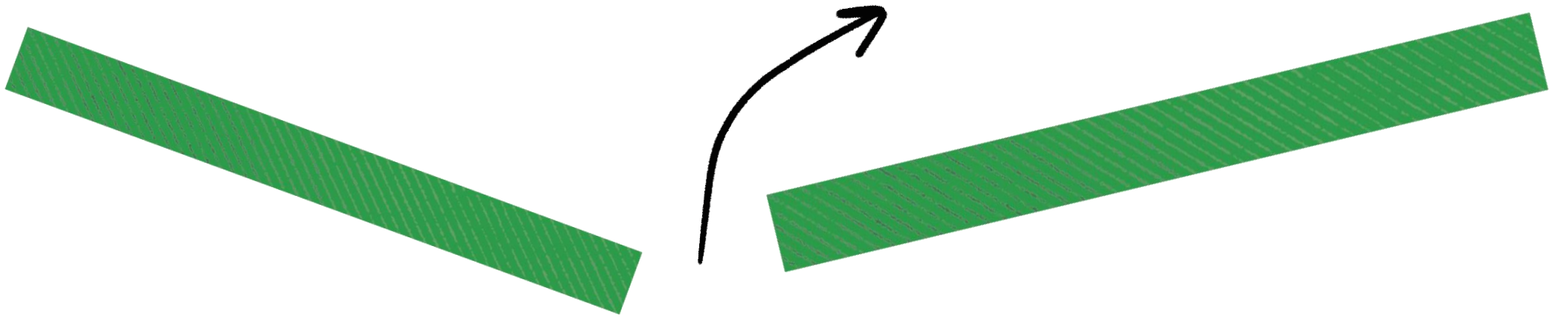
# In summary...

---

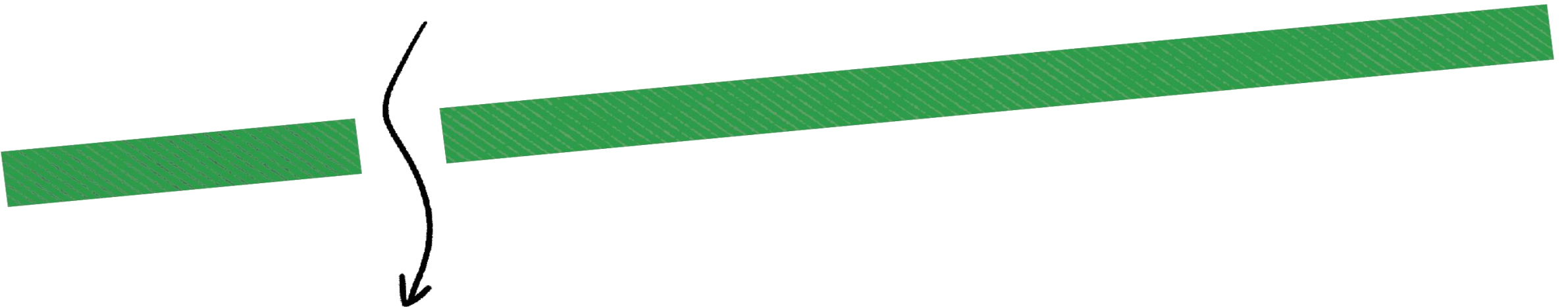


While many organizations say they value the contributions of people with lived/living expertise, they force peer workers to follow policies and practices that undermine their unique knowledge and skills. Peers face discrimination, neglect, and double standards that block them from making positive change at their organizations and in their lives.

To truly support peer work, organizations must break down the barriers *they have built* to meaningful and equitable employment. This starts with providing *all* workers job security and a living wage, but it doesn't end there. Many peers with permanent jobs still experience oppression because of hierarchies in workplace culture and physical spaces. Peers have the potential to forge new paths, but only if they are trusted, respected, and resourced on their own terms.



**How do we escape these traps and dead ends?**



# Demands:



- **Commit to honoring community knowledge:** Agencies must take direction from the people whose needs they claim to meet. People with lived/living expertise should be at every organizational level.
- **Change hiring and onboarding:** Peer work should **not** require credentials. People should be hired for their “real abilities” and trained in “things that matter” like “labor rights,” and “paperwork.”
- **Provide meaningful employment:** Peer roles must be better paid and more secure; peers also need collective representation, ideally through a “separate union.”
- **Ensure physical access and safety:** Peers need access to all agency spaces in safe and meaningful ways and need resources to reduce violence and deal with grief in the workplace.
- **Confront oppression:** Agencies must address how colonialism, white supremacy, anti-Black racism, and all forms of oppression shape their work. This starts by hiring, supporting, and respecting Black and Indigenous peer workers, but does not end there.
- **Change the culture:** Supervisors should “know and understand what value peers bring.” They must change their practices and give up some of their power.

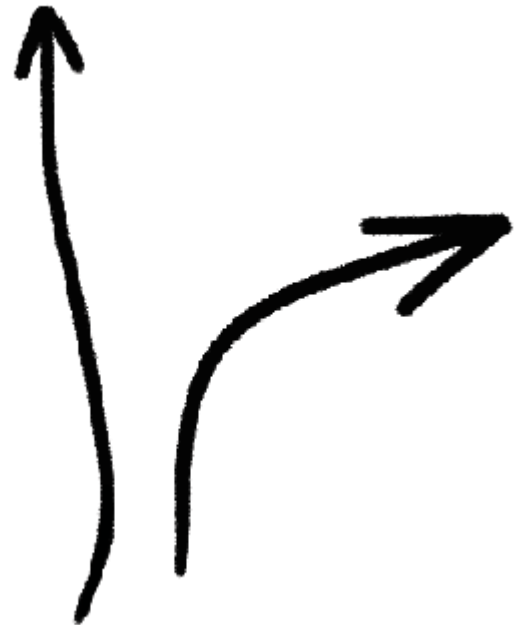
# Keep asking questions

---

Agencies must ask themselves tough questions. To support this, we have created a resource we call “questions for agencies.” It includes questions about:

- The definition of peer work
- Governance structures
- Funding decisions
- Job postings and hiring
- Compensation, job security, and benefits
- Workplace safety and access

...and more!



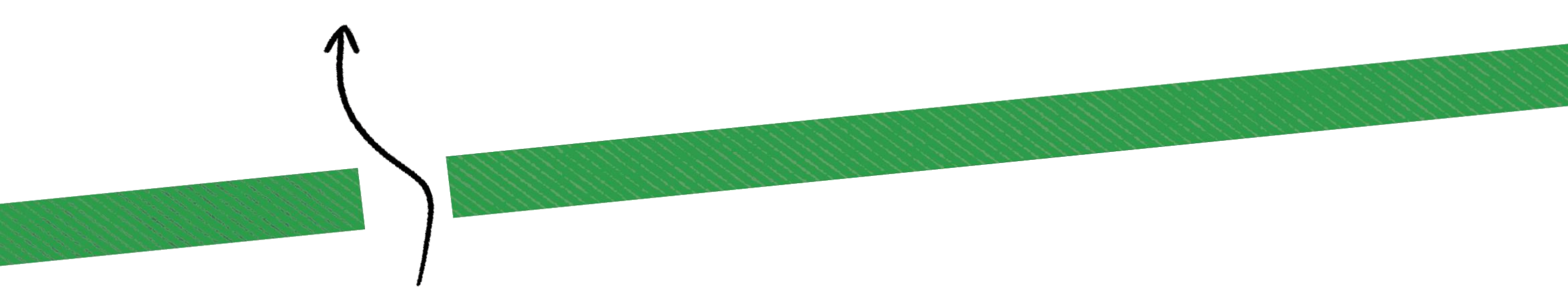
# “Moving the Dial”

---

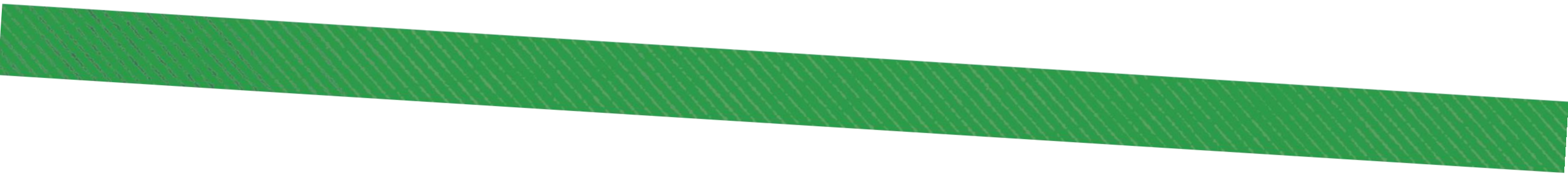


We are working to get our findings, demands, and questions into the hands of peer workers, supervisors, managers, Executive Directors, Board members and funders. We have begun doing presentations and advocating for equitable compensation for our time. We are starting to build networks and programs with our partner agencies Working for Change and Toronto Drop-In Network, as well as our new partner Breakaway, supported by the Centre for Community-Based Research. Our current priorities are:

- Building trainings for agency leaders and funders on how to support peers
- Supporting agencies in evaluating their culture and workplace wellness
- Challenging prisons and jails to allow survivors of these systems to work with people inside them
- Planting the seeds for a peer worker union



**Questions?**



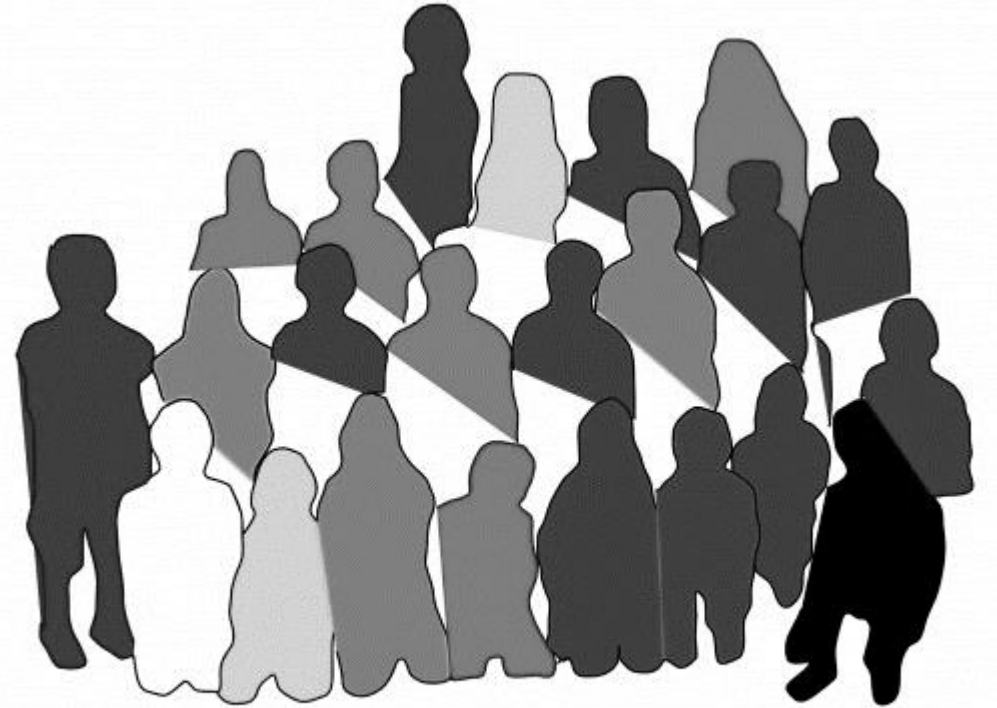


# Breakout groups

# Instructions

---

- You will be put in small groups with at least one member of the SPW team. Please take some time to introduce yourselves to each other and set some guidelines for interaction.
- Then, the SPW team member will lead you in a conversation using the questions on the next slide, and/or some of their own.
- Please choose a note taker and take notes in the Google Doc provided. Be prepared to report back on your conversations and the actions you will take to make change!

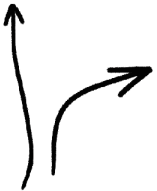




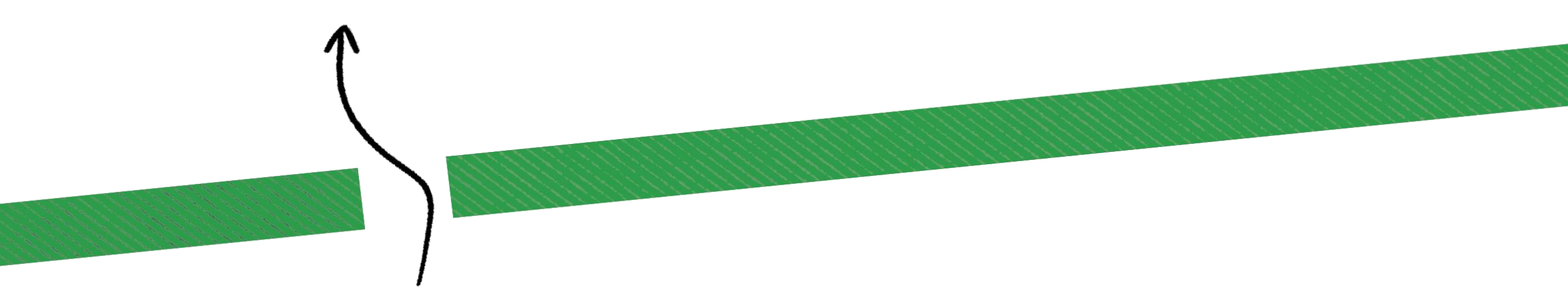
# Questions

---

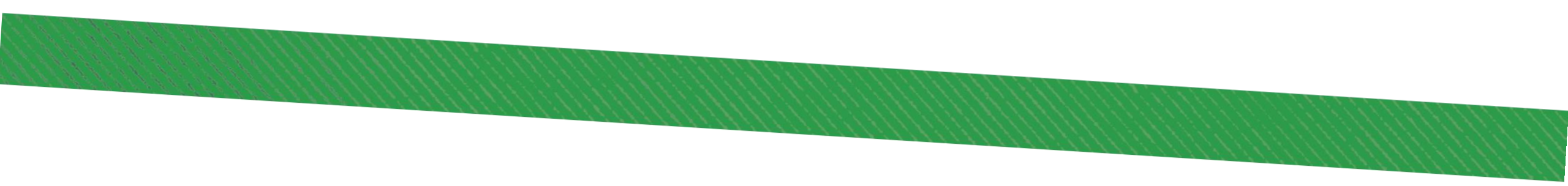
- Are people with lived/living experience guiding the work you do? If so, how? If not, why not? How can you change your work so people with lived/living experience are meaningfully involved and giving you guidance?
- What value would people with lived/living experience bring to the work you do? How can you honor that value materially (e.g., with equitable pay, respect, authorship and publication rights, etc.)?
- For people who are from communities they work in, what do you need to feel more supported in your work? For people who work in communities they are not a part of, what changes can you make to support equity, justice, and community-leadership?



\*You may also want to discuss how you define “community,” who gets to use this term, who “counts” as a “community member” and what that shows you about power.



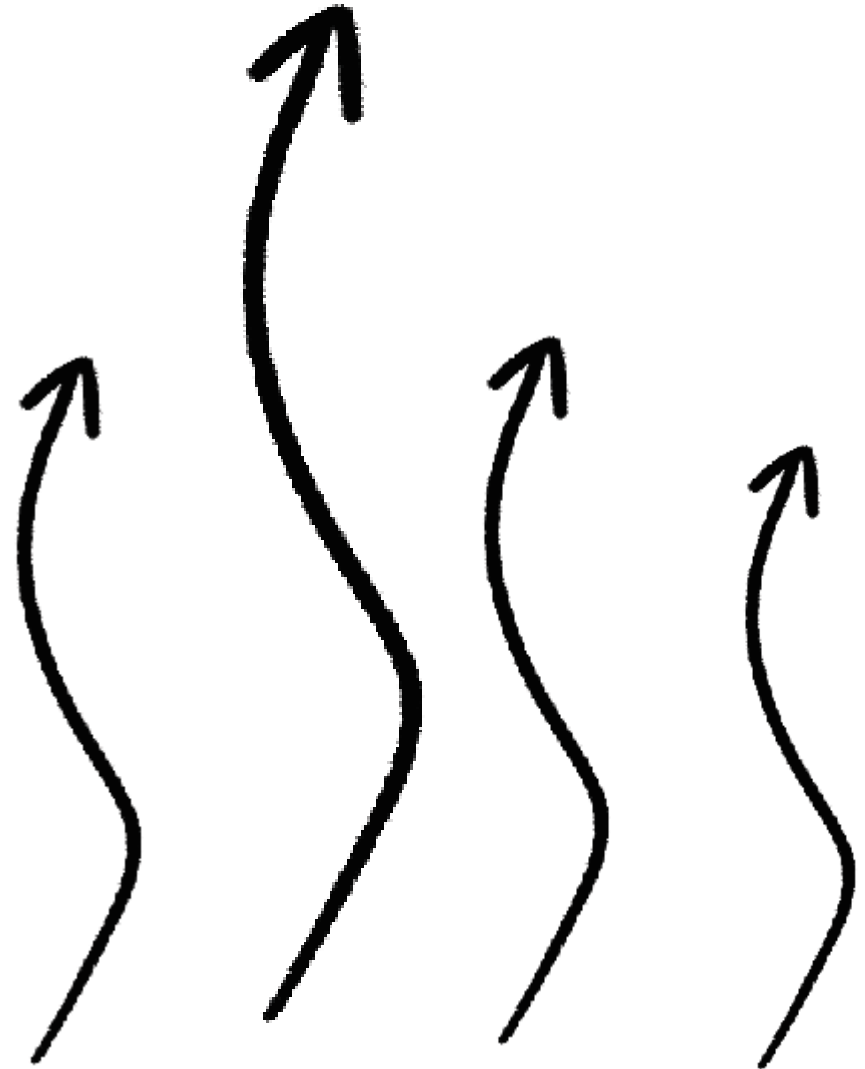
**Report back**



# Please share...

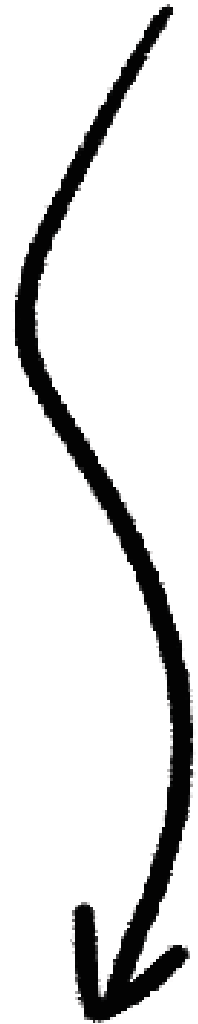
---

- What did you discuss in your small groups?
- What actions will you take to use these research findings in your own work?
- How can you stay connected to each other to build more capacity to make change?

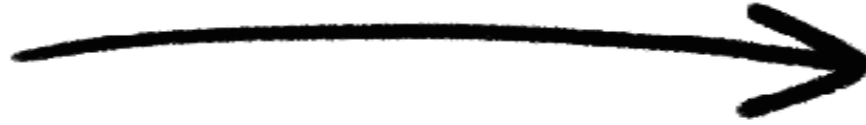


# Check out

- What was your main takeaway from this session?
- What do you have even *more* questions about now?
- What do you want to start working on straight away?
- What are you feeling nervous about? Confused about?
- What are you excited for?



# Next steps



- SPW will be working over the coming months to turn our research findings into action. Please join our [mailing list](#) to receive copies of our community reports and hear about our upcoming events.
- Please complete our [short evaluation](#) and feel free to reach out to us with any additional question, comments or ideas for ways we can use the report to: [griffin.epstein@georgebrown.ca](mailto:griffin.epstein@georgebrown.ca)

The image features three green decorative bars with a diagonal hatching pattern. One bar is at the top, another is at the bottom, and a third is on the left side. A black hand-drawn arrow points from the bottom-left bar towards the center of the page.

**Thank you!**



# Thank You!

[www.communitybasedresearch.ca](http://www.communitybasedresearch.ca)



Community-Based Research Canada  
Recherche partenariale du Canada