



# Nothing about us without us: Seven principles for leadership & inclusion of people with lived experience of homelessness

LIVED EXPERIENCE ADVISORY COUNCIL

During the 2014 Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness conference in Vancouver, a group of individuals came together with a common goal: to ensure that individuals with lived experience received equitable representation from service providers, researchers, policy makers, and others, so that they can better understand and tackle the problem of homelessness.

**We believe that without including individuals with lived experience in the decision making process, in research, and in all other endeavours, it creates an unbalanced approach to ending homelessness in Canada.**

To that end, our council was formed. Our first action was to articulate principles for the inclusion and leadership of people with lived experience in organizations and initiatives that aim to address homelessness. We presented these principles to the conference plenary under the banner, “Nothing About Us Without Us.”

These principles point to the importance of first voice inclusion in all endeavours to end homelessness. This is true of any social issue – the people who are living it usually have the best understanding about what the problem is and what needs to be done to address it. Inclusion is especially vital in the context of homelessness, though, because being excluded and silenced is a huge part of the experience of homelessness and poverty. The belief that people who are homeless do not have the competence to participate as equals in organizations is layered on top of the other stereotypes directed at us because of racism, sexism, ableism, poor-bashing, and other oppressions.

Many organizations are learning to value lived expertise, but overcoming outdated, paternalistic beliefs and practices doesn't happen overnight. Service providers, researchers and policy-makers need to work alongside people with lived experience to create new structures in which we come together as equals. We hope this document can provide support to professionals and people with lived experience as we all work together to plan and implement these changes.

# Principles

## 1. Bring the perspective of our lived experience to the forefront

### WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT:

Homelessness is an issue of injustice. People are homeless because of deep inequalities and oppressions in our society. For people with lived experience, these injustices and inequalities are clearly visible, while for those with privilege, they may be more difficult to perceive. Decades of top-down research, service provision, and policy-making have not ended homelessness, because ending homelessness requires fundamental changes to our economic and social system. These changes will only be possible if our priorities and insights are brought to the forefront. We are calling for adequate and affordable housing for all; wages and social assistance rates that provide a decent standard of living; and accessible, appropriate supports for all who need them. These are basic human rights to which everyone in Canada is entitled. We need organizations to support these demands.



### HOW TO DO IT:

- Join us in creating awareness of the issues.
- Stand beside us, not behind or in front.
- Help us make sure that no one is left out or misrepresented.
- Ensure that your organization's communications, fundraising, research, and programs do not reinforce the misconceptions that homelessness is caused by individual problems, or can be solved by charity.
- Use professional influence to help advance the goals identified by first voice people.
- Dedicate time and resources to advocacy, and support grassroots social change efforts.

## 2. Include people with lived experience at all levels of the organization

### WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT:

For too long, people with lived experience have been confined to a limited role—as service recipients, objects of policy-making, or research subjects—in efforts to end homelessness. But policy, research and service organizations require the insight and leadership of people with lived experience at all levels in order to achieve the kind of transformative change that is needed.



### HOW TO DO IT:

- Hire us in positions at all levels – front-line, administration, and management.
- Invite us to join the organization's Board and committees.

- Include lived experience of homelessness as a dimension in your organization’s equity and diversity policies.
- Create a liaison within municipal and provincial governments, including city councils and police boards.
- Work towards sustainability and advancement for “peer” positions, so that those hired on as “peer counsellors,” “peer researchers,” etc., can advance to permanent positions.

### 3. Value our time and provide appropriate supports

#### WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT:

The value of a person with lived experience is the same as that of any other social worker in the field dealing with aspects of homelessness. Trust is so much a key when working with those living in a homeless or marginalized world.



Some organizations do use first voice people in an advisory role, often without regard for the time taken by the person. This leads many times to no pay for the time involved or too little compensation. This is something that needs immediate change. The people who are asking us for consultation are receiving their pay for their time spent with us, so we should also have our time and expertise honoured. They are using our advice to build policies moving forward, so what we say has great value.

In addition to compensation, we may require other kinds of supports in order to enable our equitable participation in organizations. Barrier-free access, childcare, and transit fare are just some examples of what may be needed to make participation accessible to all. Our emotional needs, and our often limited time and energy, must also be taken into consideration. Finally, like any member of an organization, we might need information and training to be able to participate effectively.

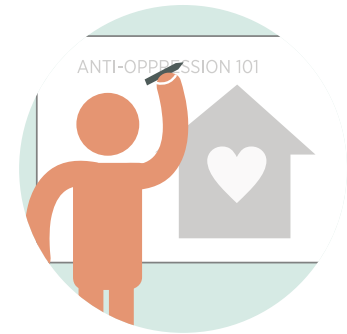
#### HOW TO DO IT:

- Anticipate the compensation and supports that will be required to properly include people with lived experience, and include those costs in funding applications.
- Compensate us well for the time spent in consultation, not only with token gift cards or minimal honorariums.
- Remember that these issues have a huge impact for us, because we can relate to the experience. Create a welcoming environment in which it is safe to express emotions.
- Develop new ways of doing business - long meetings and bureaucratic procedures can be very draining and alienating, not only for people with lived experience!
- Provide training and capacity-building to all members of the organization, including those with and without direct experience of homelessness.
- Ensure that the timeframe for an initiative includes the time required to form a good working relationship and do things at a reasonable pace.

## 4. Challenge stigma, confront oppression and promote dignity

### WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT:

As already discussed above, homelessness is caused by injustice, inequity, and oppression. Transforming our organizations, our society, and our economy to truly end homelessness will require confronting and changing all unequal relations of power, including racism, sexism, and ableism. In addition to the exclusion and marginalization we face on the basis of our race, class, gender, dis/ability, Indigenous identity, sexual orientation, age, immigrant status, and other factors, people with lived experience also face stigma and discrimination because of homelessness and poverty. Poor-bashing attitudes and practices, which are present in many organizations, undermine the dignity of people facing homelessness. Everyone in our unjust society learns oppressive ideas, and we all need to unlearn them. Stereotypes, discrimination, and violence divide us all from each other and prevent us from coming together to eradicate homelessness.



### HOW TO DO IT:

- Give us a common ground to work from by providing Anti-Oppression 101 training to all members of the organization, from participants to volunteers to front-line staff and management.
- Confront oppression through the use of anti oppression models, which are inclusive.
- Educate around intersectionality – that is, the ways that oppressions such as racism, sexism, classism and ableism work together and reinforce each other.
- Review organizational policies and practices to ensure they promote equity, dignity, and rights of people facing homelessness.

## 5. Recognize our expertise and engage us in decision-making

### WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT:

People with lived experience are often put on committees for our expertise, and to bring reality to the group, but how often are we really listened to. Most committees are comprised of people with no experience of the homeless situation. Lived expertise is needed to help steer policy and decision-making in the appropriate direction. We need to stay very much in the picture reminding others that we offer something that they do not have, and that is the expertise of our knowledge of homelessness and marginalization. Too often we are given lip service to placate us, and not enough say when the rubber hits the road. Slowly government departments are taking more seriously the role of people with lived experience. There are so many decision-making committees and organizations that really have no lived experience representation, so we have to maintain a very strong voice. The recognition is there about our value in the process, but there is such a long way to go.



#### HOW TO DO IT:

- Mandate people with lived experience into more decision-making roles in organizations dealing with issues of homelessness and marginalization.
- People with lived experience can put pressure on decision-makers to include us in influential roles by speaking when we can, by using social media, and all other methods at our disposal.

## 6. Work together towards our equitable representation

#### WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT:

Realizing that the first person voice is important to all aspects of ending homelessness in Canada, lived experience representatives must have equal representation in the decision making process. This includes equal voting rights on boards and committees, staffing and all other roles. But, changing organizations to implement equitable representation doesn't happen overnight. It is a gradual process that organizations must commit to. It requires learning, trial and error, and often a change of the culture within the organization.



#### HOW TO DO IT:

- Include equitable representation as a goal in the organization's strategic planning process.
- Set concrete objectives and specific timeframes, and work towards them.
- Identify other organizations that have successfully implemented equitable representation, and get their advice and mentorship.
- Evaluate the organization's progress, seeking input from people with lived experience in the process.

## 7. Build authentic relationships between people with and without lived experience

#### WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT:

Ending homelessness is not only about changing systems, it's also about changing relationships. Relationships of unequal power and influence must be replaced by authentic relationships. An authentic relationship simply means that each individual is treated equally. Lived experience individuals are not token members of boards, committees and staffing but are equal partners. A lived experience representative offers a unique perspective, however, our voices are only strong when we are working in concert with ALL voices in the decision making process. Don't just say we are being treated as equals, ensure that we are being treated as equals.



## HOW TO DO IT:

- Cultivate an environment of caring, acceptance and openness where differences are celebrated and everyone's contribution is acknowledged.
- Ensure that all members of the organization are included in social activities, and that those activities are accessible to all.
- Break down rigid roles such as “service provider” and “service user.”
- Celebrate together.



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## Checklist for planning inclusive and accessible events

➔ [www.homelesshub.ca/NothingAboutUsWithoutUs](http://www.homelesshub.ca/NothingAboutUsWithoutUs)

## ABOUT THE LIVED EXPERIENCE ADVISORY COUNCIL

The Lived Experience Advisory Council is a group of leaders from across Canada who share lived experience of homelessness and poverty. Our mission is to ensure the leadership and inclusion of people facing homelessness in all efforts to end it. Email us at [leac.canada@gmail.com](mailto:leac.canada@gmail.com) or find us on Facebook.

This document was prepared by LEAC members Janice Arsenault (Toronto ON), Leigh Bursey (Brockville ON), Suzi Gursoy (Waterloo ON), Kym Hines (Victoria BC), Kaummajuk Holly Jarrett (Wakefield QC), Debbie McGraw (Saskatoon SK), Terrie Meehan (Ottawa ON), Emily Paradis (Toronto ON), Al Wiebe (Winnipeg MN), and Phoenix Winter (Vancouver BC). We also acknowledge the ideas and contributions of founding LEAC members.

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