PEER PATHWAYS

RESEARCH BULLETIN
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The Neighbourhood Group received funding in November 2025 for a study to see how peer work can serve as a pathway to permanent employment.

TNG Community Services

Background

Peer roles at The Neighbourhood Group Community Services (TNGCS) began as volunteer roles, formalizing into paid roles over the last 10–25 years.

The peer program is centred on the principle of "Doing with, not for", people with lived experience and peers co-design programs and services from ideation through implementation. This increases authenticity and trust with communities who distrust systems.

Highlights in the evolution of peer roles at TNGCS:

- 2015: surpassed 100 paid peers,
- 2017: Peer Manual formalized structures around pay and expanded job descriptions
- 2017: Conducted job evaluations to ensure equal pay for equal work; ongoing work to standardize onboarding/training and to formalize agency-wide peer policies
- 2023-2028: Strategic plan target established - "1 in 5 hires are participants/ volunteers"
- 2024: Target exceeded with ~55% of hires from participants/volunteers, reflecting organization-wide adoption of lived-experience hiring.

Learn more at bit.ly/peerpathways

Overview



TNGCS offers peer programming across multiple services areas including: Urban Health and Homelessness Services (UHHS); Community Development Programs; Newcomer Settlement Services; and Child and Youth Services. Their model supports those who have experienced or are currently experiencing poverty, homelessness, mental health, unemployment, social isolation, substance abuse, youth alienation, and newcomer settlement (collectively referred to as people with lived experience/PLWE) with paid, peer work opportunities.

SN Management was contracted by TNGCS in November 2025 to carry out the study - "Peer Pathways: Elevate to Permanent Employment Project". This study was designed to help TNGCS better understand:

a. how peer work can serve as a pathway to permanent employment and enhance the economic mobility of individuals with lived experiences of poverty, settlement, mental health challenges, and substance use,

b. how peer work can be universally legitimatized as a qualification for work, and

c. the feasibility of establishing a digital learning hub to support sharing of knowledge.

Throughout this project, the following approach was taken to gather information:

- Nine focus groups and interviews were held with 55 current Peer Workers, Team Leads, Supervisors, Managers and Leadership Team members
- 11 interviews with community partners and comparator organizations, and a survey completed by 130 current and former peers.

The findings from this study presented a series of opportunities and recommendations for immediate and longer-term steps that TNGCS could pursue to achieve organizational goals related to its peer work programming.

Findings

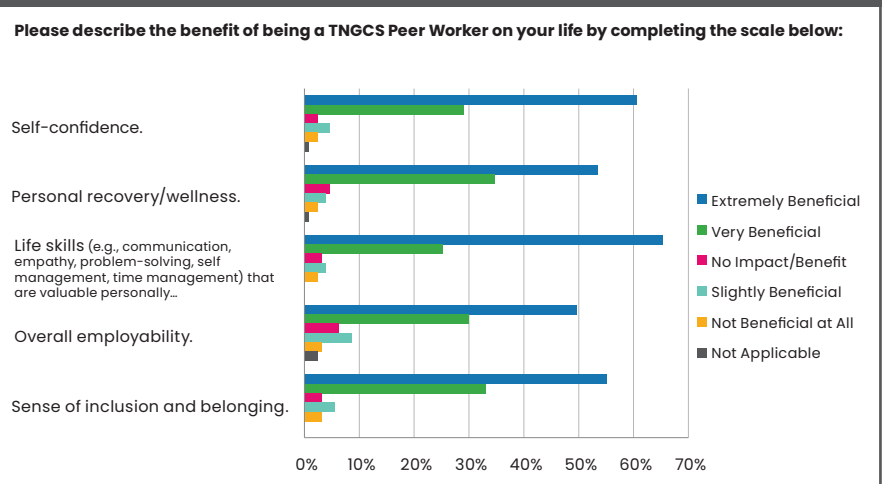
Overwhelmingly, those included in this study expressed a high degree of satisfaction with TNGCS peer work programs, and perceived TNGCS to be a leader in peer work.

Peer programs were identified in terms of not only being helpful as work experiences, but also as stabilizing forces that bring purpose, structure and confidence, and provide professional development and access to employment pathways for peer workers. At the same time, in their capacity as peer workers, peers help to create community and connect program participants with services they need.

High internal client satisfaction with strong stabilization outcomes

Over 80% of survey respondents rated TNGCS peer work extremely beneficial or very beneficial to their:

- Self-confidence
- Personal recovery/ wellness
- Life skills, and
- Sense of belonging

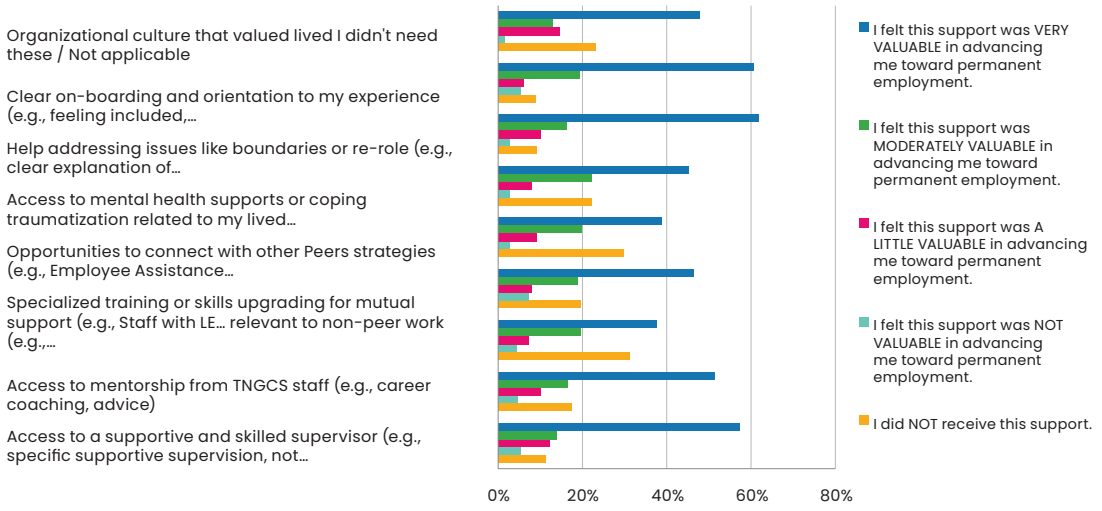


The following qualities of TNGCS's peer program were identified as factors that improve pathways to employment and economic mobility for peers: TNGCS does not requiring criminal record checks for most peer roles (except for peers working with children and seniors). Additionally, HR developed a centralized equivalency framework or formula designed to ensure that lived experience is consistently recognized and valued as a formal professional qualification across departments.

Additionally, TNGCS Maintains a strong internal culture of lived experience leadership. Many senior leaders, managers and supervisors were formerly peers themselves. Another factor that contributes to the program impact is strong support and supervision for peer workers: They experience a "collaborative" and non-punitive supervision style that understands the nuances of recovery from mental health and substance misuse. TNGCS tailors peer experiences and pathways to individual needs and journeys. Peer work programs do not offer a single pathway to regular employment. It is fundamentally understood that each peer worker's journey is unique. Some

peers move on to regular employment at TNGCS, some pursue careers outside of social services, and others may step back, deciding that they are not ready for additional responsibility. Within UHHS there are a variety of different peer roles. Some are intentionally designed to provide high-support to peer workers while other are designed for peers who require lower levels of support and supervision. This tiered approach enables peer workers to progress and develop their capacity to assume increasing responsibility in a supportive environment.

Which of the following supports did you/have you received as a Peer Worker at TNGCS?



- **Over 70% rated these supports as very or moderately valuable in advancing Peer Workers toward permanent/ regular employment: Clear on-boarding and orientation, Culture that values lived experience, and Access to a supportive supervisor**
- **67% rated 'access to mentorship from TNGCS staff' as very or moderately valuable**

TNGCS Cultivates external partnerships to provide peer workers with specialized training and diverse options for job progression. Peers in partnership programs, such as those connected to Hospitals in Toronto, have access to training that helps them to qualify for these positions and managers/supervisors actively assess progress and link peer workers who are ready for new opportunities. Pilots are underway to adapt this model to other TNGCS programs and other partners. TNGCS Peer training offers development opportunities and supports. The UHHS Peer Work Practice Manual specifies that peer workers develop employment and career goals at the start of their contract and track these over time. This allows peer workers to access training or TNGCS's Employment Services early on and get the support and encouragement they may need to advance if that is the goal they are pursuing.

Areas of Opportunity to strength employment pathways within the program

This study also demonstrated opportunities to improve TNGCS's peer program. This includes further reduction of administrative barriers/burden would reduce barriers for peer workers. This could be accomplished by either providing supports during onboarding or find alternatives to new hire documentation requirements (i.e., void cheques, SIN card, three professional references, etc.). It would also be helpful to provide greater transparency about TNGCS's employment pathway and the steps that peer workers can take to move from casual to part-time peer to more regular employment at TNGCS. Another important consideration would be to standardize onboarding and training modules across departments, where applicable, to offer peer workers a consistent, high-quality experience and to leverage and strengthen the use of best practices across the organization. Finally, it would be a support to give all peer workers access to TNGCS's Employment Centre. With access to professional employment services, ideally within the first weeks of their employment with TNGCS, peer workers will have consistent access to career development supports.

Survey Snapshot

- 62% reported that onboarding and orientation was clear and very valuable (+16% moderately valuable)
- 57% reported that it was very valuable to have access to a supportive and skilled supervisor (+14% moderately valuable)
- 51% reported that it was very valuable to receive mentorship from TNGCS staff (+17% moderately valuable)
- 40% cited the lack of a clear internal pathway for Peer Workers to advance into permanent roles at TNGCS as a barrier
- 22% struggled because they did not have formal qualifications or credentials recognized by employers
- 16% lacked necessary work experience unrelated to their lived experience
- 16% faced barriers related to criminal records or the risk of losing OW/ODSP benefits
- Only 21% reported having successfully transitioned to a permanent role (internally or externally)



Barriers to Employment Externally

UHHS peer workers and leads reported that external employers and some partner agencies hold biases against those with lived experience of homelessness or substance use (i.e., view peers as clients rather than professionals). This same bias was not reported by community program peer workers and leads.

- Peer workers reported that stigma and discrimination impact employment (i.e., Canadian work experience requirement, selection of candidates, interview process).
- Stigma intersects with various forms of discrimination
    - Intersection of racism and substance use
    - Stigma and discrimination intersect for Black and/or LGBTQ+ peers
    - Stigma attached to neighbourhood (e.g., youth from certain areas are perceived negatively).
- Despite being a goal for many peer workers, advancing into full-time employment poses a financial threat. Referred to by some as the "benefits cliff", peer workers risk losing subsidized/rent-geared-to-income housing or health benefits (ODSP/OW) as their income increases, potentially leaving them financially worse off despite higher wage earnings.
- Youth peer workers reported that mainstream institutions often require a formal degree which prevents them from qualifying for roles even if they have practical experience and skills. The primary barrier to post secondary education is the high cost of tuition and living expenses. Many youth can only afford education costs if they work full-time which conflicts with being in school full time.

Long Term Improvement Opportunities

There were several areas highlighted in the study to support the growth of TNGCS's Peer Program and to improve peer Pathways. These include:

Development of a Peer Worker Development Program

The UHHS program could create, scale and sustain a tiered peer worker development program (PWDP) that offer peer workers increased responsibility and decreased supervision in different roles over time (i.e., through its portfolio of 17 programs). Once piloted, this could be expanded to other TNGCS Programs

Increased Partnerships

TNGCS can increase the number of peer work opportunities available to people with lived experience, within TNGCS programs and within the community by increasing and strengthening community partnerships. In particular, there is an opportunity for TNGCS to strengthen access to employment and employment pathways for a greater number of peer workers by creating a social enterprise - "peer employment placement agency" (i.e., for hospitals and shelters).



Credentials and Certification

This study also explored the value of formal peer worker credentials/qualifications, such as a Peer Worker Certification. Study participants did see some value in increasing peer access to credentials, including formal peer worker certification. However, TNGCS could pursue several different approaches to achieve this.

- TNGCS could formalize a TNGCS peer worker certification program and market it to peer workers and employers as a professionally recognized credential. Current TNGCS training materials already include population and program specific modules, as well as standardized competencies, and establishing a recognized in-house certification program can help reduce barriers to certification such as fees.
- TNGCS could also work with academic institutions such as George Brown College or the Michener Institute to formalize and have its PWDP recognized as a credit toward a college diploma.
- There is an opportunity for TNGCS to champion peer work and peer workers' access to credentials by engaging in or leading sector-wide advocacy with the aim of convincing funders that peer worker credentialing is a "treatment" cost or a "workforce outcome" worth investing in.

Digital Learning Hub

This study explored the feasibility of a Peer Work Digital Learning Hub. Feedback from participants suggests that there is value in a digital platform that provides access to peer work and development information, resources and training. However, there is concern that without clarity regarding purpose and scope for a "Hub", as well as strategies for ongoing operations and sustainability, the investment cost could outweigh the benefits.

Other Recommendations include:



- Standardization of the PWDP across the organization to ensure that all peer worker programs are working in alignment towards the organization's goals for peer work and are delivering peer worker programming (training, development and supports) using a consistent set of standards, policies and processes.
- Review and update its policies and practices related to peer worker recruitment, on-boarding, training and supervision in order to increase equitable access to roles and establish a foundation for long-term success for peer workers across all departments.
- Ensure that peer workers across all of TNGCS's programs are made aware of and are connected to TNGCS's employment services, ideally during the onboarding stage.
- Provide consistent information to organizations that hire TNGCS's peer workers. Doing so will provide a high-quality experience for the peer workers as well as the hiring organization and strengthen TNGCS's reputation with current and potential partners.
- Leverage TNGCS's data management systems to better understand the peer worker pathways, experiences and outcomes and identify and advance evidence-based improvement strategies.
- Establish an employment agency as social enterprise to match qualified peer workers to a roster of employers, increase the employment pipeline for people with lived experience, and generate revenues for reinvestment into its programming.
- To maximize its leadership role, and scale up the social enterprise, it is recommended that TNGCS develop a central repository of information and roll out a strategy for exchanging knowledge with peer workers, employers, partners and other key stakeholders.
- Develop and promote a TNGCS branded employment pathway for peer workers, including expanding peer work to new parts of TNGCS and to external employers.
- Scale up the employment supports, including follow-up supports, provided to peer workers.
- Strengthen pathways to education for TNGCS peer workers.