

Overview

Forming partnerships with individuals with lived expertise is urgent and necessary in the fight to end homelessness. As communities grapple with how to create more equitable systems, the increasing awareness of the importance of [engaging individuals with lived expertise](#) of homelessness presents new possibilities for implementing equitable change. Hiring people with lived expertise is one of several [staffing options for COVID-19 Emergency Solutions Grants \(ESG-CV\) administration](#). Whatever the position within the organization, the benefits to the workplace and for the person with lived experience and expertise is a win-win!

Before the hiring process begins, there are some key requirements for the recruitment, hiring, effective onboarding, and retention of people who have experienced homelessness: [inclusive](#) and equitable hiring practices; [staff orientation to racial equity](#) and trauma; a supportive workplace that creates a sense of belonging; and a workplace environment that values the awareness, knowledge, and wisdom that comes from experiencing homelessness. To end homelessness, it is important to develop authentic partnerships with people who have experienced it. Hiring people who are [experts by experience](#) allows for the exploration of new opportunities for both the organization and the individual.

Getting Started

Workplaces hiring people with lived experience and expertise of homelessness should have a strategic plan that outlines their recruitment, hiring, and retention goals and objectives. The workplace culture should be welcoming, supportive, and authentically inclusive, and it should provide applicants and employees with the necessary tools and resources to apply for open positions, participate in the interview process, and succeed in positions once hired.

A commitment must be made to fully value the perspectives and expertise that people with lived experience bring to the workplace to avoid tokenism. Organizations should conduct ongoing self-assessments to understand where they are on the continuum of becoming an [anti-racist, equitable, and inclusive organization](#). The self-assessment can be a powerful tool to identify exclusive and tokenizing practices, amplify diverse voices and concerns, and highlight milestones as progress is made.

People with lived experience and expertise of homelessness in the workplace can:

- Build relationships with clients that elicit trust, acceptance, understanding, and empathy due to the shared experience. This is especially helpful in situations with individuals who find themselves at risk of homelessness or who have recently become homeless.
- Rediscover, develop, and enhance professional and creative skills and abilities learned before, during, or after their lives were interrupted by homelessness.
- Experience the sense of security, belonging, and support of a work family.
- Encourage and inspire others while assisting them to navigate barriers they themselves may have faced.
- Support staff and clients with identifying strategies that can lead to changes in policies and practices that could help to eliminate systemic and structural barriers that families and individuals experiencing homelessness may encounter.
- Provide an example of leadership for clients currently experiencing homelessness by demonstrating the ability to exit homelessness and utilize the experience as a contributing organization or engaged community member.

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Key Recruitment, Hiring, and Retention Considerations

1. Identify employment services, job programs, groups, and organizations connecting with people with the lived experience and expertise of homelessness seeking employment. [Engaging your community](#) by utilizing local job boards, Continuum of Care (CoC) Listservs, peer support networks, and organizational websites can support this effort.
2. Provide [peer support](#) as an option for people with lived expertise and experience of homelessness, particularly those who have experienced chronic homelessness and have multifaceted support needs that can make the workplace environment challenging. Strengthening opportunities that engage people with lived experience and expertise in ways that build trust, respect, and mutual understanding promotes success in the workplace. As mentors and role models, peers can provide invaluable support and show from their own lives that it is possible to exit homelessness and maintain employment.
3. Provide [fair and equitable compensation](#) for comparable work by ensuring salaries, stipends, and monetary benefits are fair both relative to the position that people hired with lived expertise and experience of homelessness fill within the organization and compared to the same or similar position across the labor market.
4. Build and promote racial [equity](#) into the hiring process to support Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) with lived experience and expertise of homelessness as viable candidates. Develop and maintain a workplace culture that supports the recruitment, hiring, retention, and full participation of BIPOC at every level of the organization, including management and leadership. Train staff to [identify and address biases](#) that may influence hiring practices that effectively exclude, diminish, or harm people with lived experience and expertise.
5. Provide education and training for all personnel, including people with lived expertise and experience of homelessness and other [peer support specialists](#), in developing and maintaining a workplace that is equitable, diverse, people-centered, and inclusive.

Potential Challenges

People with lived experience may potentially become discouraged and disempowered by personal and organizational challenges. These challenges must be fully considered and mindfully addressed for organizations to develop a productive and inclusive workplace for people with lived expertise and experience to thrive. In addition, organizations should invest in designing and sustaining culturally responsive support systems.

The organization must have an awareness and understanding of trauma connected to poverty and homelessness and how trauma can be triggered in various ways. Organization leaders and staff members should receive ongoing professional development training on homelessness, trauma, and inclusion. Providing space for people with lived experience of homelessness to acknowledge diverse traumas, explore and identify healthy coping skills, and receive validation is helpful to a workplace where they can be supported in their experience, and they can be supportive of the experiences of others in the workplace.

Conclusion

Those most impacted by the experience of homelessness have the expertise to help others in navigate homeless services systems and identify solutions. The recruitment, hiring, and retention of people with lived expertise and experience of homelessness call for intentionality in recruiting, hiring, and retention, as well as supportive measures in the workplace that promote equity, diversity, inclusion, agency, and the use of the expertise they bring.