

HEARING THE VOICES OF LIVED/LIVING EXPERIENCE

BACKGROUND:

Green Wood Coalition is a radically inclusive street-level organization that uses a community model of caring to walk alongside people who are hungry, homeless and hurting. We recognize that each of us has a need to give and each of us has a need to receive. To this end, we believe that people with lived/living experience of poverty and homelessness must have the opportunity to participate in shaping the services and programs that impact them.

Green Wood Coalition has been involved in numerous initiatives to advance the integration of the voices of people with lived experience into social services planning, program and policy development processes. While these services are designed to help individuals living with instability, they are most often developed by people whose experiences are predominantly from a perspective of stability. The end result may not be effective for individuals and families who are marginalized and need these services most -- those experiencing poverty, homelessness, mental and physical health challenges and substance dependency.

“How you can expect someone who has never, ever, had to be in that position to know what it feels like, three months into living on the second level in Nathan Phillips Square parking lot in March.... Someone who’s always had food in their belly, a home, family support, went to school, to university, had a job, in an agency... how can anyone expect them to be able to, at any meaningful level, be able to identify with the situation the person’s in. It’s an impossibility.”

- Green Wood Coalition focus group participant

People with lived/living experience understand the realities of their struggles as no one else can. Their stories and experiences serve as powerful tools for building compassion. They can offer vital input and perspectives in the planning and development of programs and services within the social service and healthcare systems. More and more, agencies are beginning to value this kind of engagement and are adopting participatory practices to improve the impact of their outcomes, realizing that people with lived experience should be key contributors to finding solutions to the problem at hand.

Green Wood Coalition brings over a decade of street-level experience connecting individuals who have become disconnected to housing, healthcare and income assistance while providing them with a sense of community -- feelings of belonging, acceptance and self-worth. From this unique perspective, Green Wood has been able to assist government partners and agencies who are interested in integrating the voices of lived/living experience into their work.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The ultimate values that embody this work are inclusion, respect for the dignity of each human being and a belief that every person has the right to live in peace and to find meaning in their life. The following guiding principles must underpin all encounters and approaches:

1. “Everyone has a story” - People are the unique experts of their own experience
2. “Nothing about us without us” – The people affected are best placed to identify how their needs may be met and they must have a place at the planning table
3. “With trust comes great responsibility” – Individuals sharing intimate details about themselves must be provided a safe environment, free of judgment, where they feel respected and valued
4. “Focus on what’s strong, not what’s wrong” – People are much more than their problems, and their unique gifts are waiting to be revealed

TOOLS FOR LISTENING TO LIVED/LIVING EXPERIENCE

INTERVIEWS:

Meeting face-to-face with individuals is often the best way to consult, especially when you need to explore a topic and learn new information.

Case study: From Homelessness to Home

Green Wood Coalition and Trent/Fleming School of Nursing partnered on a study entitled, *From Homeless to Home*, that examined the lived experience of individuals living in a rural area (Northumberland County) or small town (Port Hope, Cobourg) who were currently homeless or had been homeless within the previous two years. Contacts were made through GWC outreach workers, and 19 interviews were conducted over the course of the project.

The interviews were held in safe, trusted, and public venues chosen in collaboration with the researcher and participant. Consent for participation and audiotaping was obtained. The participant

could choose to alter the questions or add topics that they deemed relevant. The interviews were respectfully limited to one hour, due to the sensitive nature of the content.

Based on their lived experiences, individuals were able to share their knowledge of barriers and facilitators to finding housing and ideas about how policy makers might alter the system to provide effective support for individuals.

WORKSHOPS:

Workshops are larger engagement sessions that serve to educate, collaborate, and prioritize within a group of stakeholders.

Case Study: Northumberland Lived Experience Advisory Project

Over a six-month period, Green Wood Coalition implemented the *Northumberland Lived Experience Advisory* pilot project following a research stage during which Green Wood conducted a literature review and consulted with experts who had developed successful lived experience advisory models.

The project involved 10 Northumberland County residents with lived/living experience with poverty. It was designed to help participants reclaim their voice by sharing their stories with those who are in positions to effect change. In Part 1, the participants attended 10 weekly, four-hour workshops to develop effective story-telling skills. In Part 2, they presented their stories to social service agencies, community and government organizations. These presentations to community agencies were a valuable component in creating better alignment between the needs of individuals with the development and delivery of services and programs.

More than a storytelling exercise, this project was designed to use members' collective lived experience to identify and inform change. A secondary outcome was the development of a concrete ideas list that began the process of identifying barriers. Green Wood Coalition has developed a manual entitled *We Are Our Stories*, to assist others who wish to implement a similar advisory group in their community.

FOCUS GROUPS:

A focus group gathers a small number of people who are then led through an open discussion by an experienced facilitator who is trusted by the participants.

Case Study: Making Room at the Table

Following the success of the *Lived Experience Advisory Project*, Green Wood Coalition was engaged to create a guiding document to provide a framework for the engagement and inclusion of people with lived/living experience in the formation, planning, governance and delivery of services within Northumberland County's income, housing, homelessness and healthcare systems.

This work entailed six focus group sessions across the county with diverse groups with lived experience of poverty, including people who identify as LGBTQ+ and people with intellectual disabilities. The overriding message delivered by participants was that the system from which they seek help leaves them feeling stigmatized, disrespected and judged.

The guiding document, *Room at the Table*, provided many recommendations and options for the inclusion of people with lived/living experience into county service provision. Among these were recommendations for staff training based on the input of individuals who have been directly impacted by the system, the inclusion of peer support workers and/or third-party advocates, and the creation of a permanent lived experience advisory panel to provide ongoing input.

"I am eternally grateful for the people out there who cared about me as a human being. That's the most important thing we can do, that when we see someone, recognize their humanness, recognize their vulnerability, recognize their strengths and their weaknesses..."

- Green Wood Coalition focus group participant

FURTHER DISCUSSION

In order to achieve a broader beneficial impact for the communities we serve, valuing the lived experience of the most marginal individuals in our communities starts with creating a process for voice empowerment, which allows their stories to be both told and heard. If Green Wood Coalition can assist with amplifying the voice of lived/living experience in your organization or sector, please contact us.

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