

Managing People with Lived Experience Toolkit

Overview

46 million Americans are living with a substance use disorder (SUD) and 70% of them are employed. People with lived experience (PWLE) can reach them—if we support them. Empowering PWLE begins with managers who understand their value, champion their voices, and invest in their success






People With Lived Experience

People With Lived Experience (PWLE) are individuals who have directly navigated substance use, mental health challenges or related life experiences such as unhoused individuals or involvement with the justice system. In the public health and recovery workplace, they bring:

- Firsthand understanding of complex systems
- Deep empathy and trust-building capacity
- Unique insights that enhance service delivery, data interpretation and policy design

“Lived experience is professional experience.”

Tips for Managing PWLE

-  **Set the Tone Together:** Collaborate with your team to create shared expectations that promote trust, inclusion and psychological safety.
-  **You don't need a big budget to support your team.** Small acts—like flexible hours or quiet space—can make a big difference. It's about showing trust and care, not spending more.
-  **Stress doesn't always speak loudly, Sometimes it's in the silence:** A small check-in can make a big difference—people don't need you to fix things, just to notice they're human.
-  **Create Spaces for Connection:** Establish Peer Communities of Practice or regular check-ins where lived experience is welcomed and supported.
-  **Share Tools That Empower:** Introduce resources like the PWLE Wellness Plan to help staff navigate stress, identify support needs and stay grounded in their recovery and growth.

The CDC Foundation has placed 57 field employees, many with lived experience, into 22 jurisdictions since 2022. Their job titles include Recovery Coach, Linkage to Care Coordinator, Peer Navigator, Overdose Coordinator, and Data Analyst

How to support the work of PWLE...



Trauma-Informed Supervision: Avoid re-traumatization. Foster resilience with empathy-driven management style.



Psychological Safety: Create workspaces where People With Lived Experience (PWLE) feel safe, valued and empowered to speak up.



Peer Integration: PWLE aren't just employees—they're experts. Include them in program design, data analysis and policy feedback.



Training and Tools: Offer wellness plans, Employee Assistance Program (EAP) resources and skills development so PWLE can thrive—not just survive.

How do PWLE Make Teams Stronger?

PWLE offer unique insights that enhance:

- Data interpretation (they see the story behind the stats)
- Outreach Strategies (they've been on the receiving end)
- Program Design (they know what really works)
- Stigma Reduction (their presence alone changes minds)
- Economic Advantage (they help you do more with less)

Impact Shows in the Data

Peer Recovery Specialists (PRS) played a key role in Baltimore County's progress—helping drive a drop in fatal overdoses from 286 in 2023 to 200 in 2024.

Since its launch in 2022, The Hub in Eastern Kentucky has connected over 250 individuals to substance use disorder (SUD) treatment through the work of Recovery Navigators

Established in 2021, Buncombe County's Post-Overdose Response Team in North Carolina, including peer specialists, responded to 500+ calls, referring 91 to support and 16 to rehab.

In 2022, Puerto Rico recorded 2,140 overdoses—64.7% were successfully reversed, thanks in large part to community programs led by Peer Navigators.

“From the start, my voice mattered. My supervisor didn't just hear me—she truly listened. Whether I had a new idea or a concern, she made space for it, and for me. Her leadership turned collaboration into something meaningful, where I always felt seen, supported, and valued as a person with lived experience”. -Ayden Nunez, OD2A CDC Foundation Data Analyst Alumni

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