

# Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) Government of Canada

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## Peer Support Program (PSP)

### Governance

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*Mental Health*

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A healthy and respectful workplace.  
It's everyone's responsibility.

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this document is to establish responsibilities, procedures and requirements necessary to achieve the objective of the ESDC Mental Health Peer Support Program (PSP).

A growing concern in Canada is the impact mental health challenges have on people over the course of their career, many of whom are affected at the peak of their performing years. It is impossible to know exactly how each person experiencing mental health challenges feels, or how they see their lives and the world around them, including their workplace and their relationship with colleagues and management. Everyone's circumstance is unique.

Twenty to twenty-five per cent of the Canadian labour force is affected by issues of mental health ranging from stress, to burn-out, to depression. These, and other mental health conditions, can result in significant long-term disability. No other illness has such an impact on the Canadian workforce.

Connecting with another person who has not only lived with mental health challenges (or is perhaps still doing so) but who is also familiar with the work environment — a peer — can be a vital link for someone struggling with their own situation. Considering the fact that most Canadian adults spend more time at work than in any other life setting, it is important that the workplace be a supportive space.

Research has shown that peer support alleviates stigma and fosters healthier coping strategies (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2010). In some workplaces, it also had the following systemic impacts:

- ✓ Increased usage of Employee Assistance Program and other mental health professional services;
- ✓ Decreased short term and long term sick leave absences related to mental health;
- ✓ Increased engagement of employees;
- ✓ Improved employee health & wellbeing.

Peer support can help navigate the intricacies of resources and supports which, to someone living with a mental health challenge, can seem to be an overwhelmingly complicated maze. Peer support can help people regain independence and mastery over their own mental health recovery processes, literally transforming lives and enabling people to participate fully in, and contribute to their workplace, families, and society.

Peer support is the use of lived experience with a mental health challenge (either personally, or through supporting a loved one) to inspire hope and empower others in similar situations by providing social and emotional support. It may be complimentary to, but is not a replacement for professional medical and clinical care.

Those who choose to connect with a peer supporter should expect a private, confidential relationship based on support and understanding from a peer who has walked in similar



shoes. A Peer Supporter can draw from personal lived experience and acquired skills to offer support as a peer strives to find their own unique path towards recovery.

ESDC therefore included the implementation of a Peer Support Program as part of its activities supporting the department's Integrated Mental Health Framework, which aims to foster a workplace that promotes psychological health and safety and encourages employees and managers to address mental health concerns openly. The Framework is based on three pillars:

- 1- promote understanding and awareness of mental health;
- 2- prevent psychological injury; and
- 3- resolve arising issues.

Although the Peer Support Program contributes mainly to the resolve pillar by providing a supportive mechanism for employees dealing with mental health challenges, it also promotes a stigma-free work environment, while preventing mental health situations from spiraling into permanent injuries resulting in long term sick leave or permanent incapacity to work.

The term "mental health challenge" refers to a wide spectrum of circumstances faced by ESDC employees. These can include, but are not limited to: feelings of depression or anxiety, anger, overcoming traumatic experience, feeling overwhelmed, substance abuse, or adopting self-destructive behaviors. It also includes personal life challenges that ESDC employees may experience such as marital breakdown, severe workplace stress or conflict, illness or loss of a loved one or peer, etc.

## **OBJECTIVE**

The objective of the ESDC Mental Health Peer Support program is to support and empower employees coping with mental health issues, either personally or through a loved one, to find their own path to recovery.

The PSP is a confidential, volunteer, non-clinical program for employees of ESDC who are experiencing mental health challenges, and/or for employees who have loved ones experiencing mental health challenges.

Under this program, "employee" refers to anyone employed by ESDC. Students, casual, term and indeterminate employees of all groups and levels, whether in the workplace or off on paid or unpaid leave, can access the Peer Support Program.

## **PRINCIPLES**

- Build a supportive community at work;
- Support a workplace culture, as stated in the ESDC Integrated Mental Health Framework, where the stigma of seeking help or discussing mental health issues is reduced among managers and employees;



- Recognize and value the potential impacts outside ESDC, and potentially outside of the Federal Public Service, for broader culture change by championing Mental Health Peer Support in our workplace.

## PSP STRUCTURE

Peer Supporters report to the PSP Management Office but given the size of ESDC, the PSP Management Office is supported by Liaison Officers. In addition to, and separate from the PSP Management Office, the PSP is guided by a PSP Steering Committee and an assigned Chair. See Figure 1 .

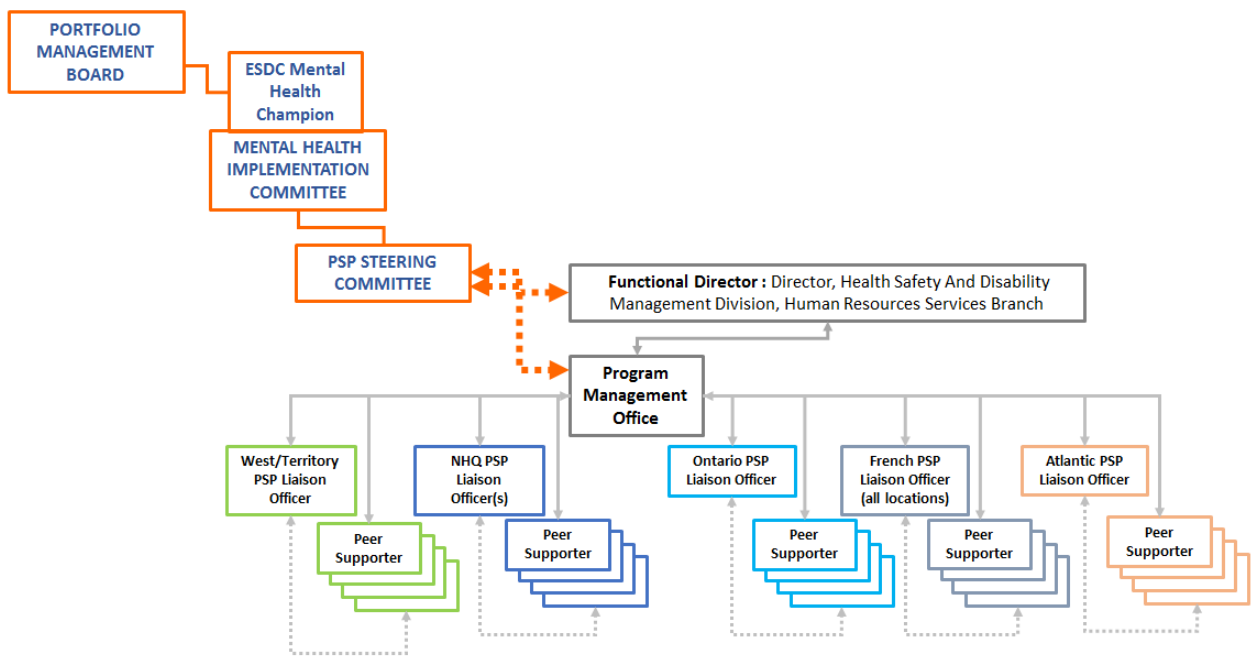


Figure 1- PSP Governance Structure  
(number and layout of Liaison Officers to be determined once Peer Supporters are recruited)

## ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

### Department (ESDC)

As an organization, ESDC is responsible for ensuring that the benefits of the program are fully realized:

- Ensure full awareness of the program across the organization; promote and encourage use of the program through awareness and education programs for all employees;



- Train a sufficient number of employees to be Peer Supporters and, as much as possible, ensure that they represent the department's diverse workforce;
- Provide selected Peer Supporters opportunities to develop their skills on an annual basis by providing support, training, and continuous development;
- Ensure the availability of Peer Supporters to respond to peers, as needed; and
- Maintain open and on-going communication with the Peer Supporter network to ensure the program is relevant to the needs of employees.

### *Steering Committee*

See Committee's [Terms of Reference](#).

### *PSP Management Office*

The Peer Support Program Management Office is responsible and accountable for the planning, implementation, development and improvement of the program and is accountable to the functional director.

Responsibilities include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Supervise all Peer Supporters, and be the primary contact for any issues, concerns, questions, and suggestions regarding the delivery of Peer Support at ESDC;
- Provides operational direction, advice and professional leadership as it relates to the development, implementation, operation and sustainability of the program;
- Act as focal point for collection, distribution of information and communications regarding the program;
- Regularly liaises with Liaison Officers to get feedback and status updates, and to provide advice, recommendations, assistance, and guidance in specific case management and resolution of critical issues concerning peers;
- Advise Liaison Officers of all changes, and additions to the ESDC Mental Health Peer Support Program;
- Provide Liaison Officers with pertinent documents as received, i.e. role descriptions, policies, and communications for distribution;
- Maintain the evaluation and reporting process;
- Identify professional development and training requirements in consultation with the Steering Committee; and
- Organize regular meeting with Liaison Officers, minimally every two months.

### *PSP Liaison Officer*

A Liaison Officer is a Peer Supporter who has been selected on a consensus basis by the Peer Supporters and the PSP Management Office. The Liaison Officer performs this role in addition to the normal peer support role. They are a volunteer who agrees to an initial commitment of at least two years (renewable).



The Liaison Officer does not have functional authority over the delivery of peer support services. The Liaison Officer is instrumental in assisting with the coordination of activities and issues. Decisions remain the role of the PSP Management Office.

Responsibilities include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Respect and maintain confidentiality of personal information as per Confidentiality section, including when discussing a situation with a Peer Supporter or PSP Management Office;
- Provide a sounding board to Peer Supporters within their area when they are faced with complex cases by discussing the options and when appropriate recommend that the PSP Management Office be involved for any key decisions if the issue cannot be resolved at that level;
- Maintain regular contact with Peer Supporters in their area and assist the PSP Management Office with dissemination of information;
- Coordinate regular Peer Support team meetings in their area to foster and encourage the development of a community of practice;
- Assist the PSP Management Office with the organisation of PSP meetings, recruitment activities and training in their area or at the National Level;
- Assist the PSP Management Office with program outreach activities in their area to help promote the PSP;
- Maintain regular contact with the PSP Management Office to brief on trends, challenges and best practices within their area;
- Attend Peer Support Training courses and annual professional development sessions to remain engaged and up to date with the evolution of the PSP;
- If necessary, in partnership with their manager, make time for additional involvement as a Liaison Officer. This role may be part of the employee's performance agreement. Should this not be possible for operational reasons, the Peer Supporter may be requested by the PSP Management Office to not take on the role of a PSP Liaison Officer;
- In exceptional circumstances, if it is determined that additional clinical resources are required in a given situation with a Peer that a Peer Supporter helped, the Liaison Officer will follow up with the PSP Management Office for further direction, with the exception of crisis situations. For crisis refer to Crisis Management Protocols;

A Liaison Officer may also participate as a member on the Steering Committee.

### *Peer Supporter*

A Peer Supporter is a volunteer who agrees to an initial commitment of at least two years (renewable).



Peer Supporter responsibilities include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Successfully complete Peer Support training, and additional training modules/sessions as required;
- Establish rapport with peers and build a relationship based on trust, respect, genuineness and empathy while maintaining clear boundaries;
- Respect and maintain confidentiality of personal information as per Confidentiality section;
- Apply and respect the principles of self-care to mitigate the impact of Peer Support work and reduce the possibility of relapse;
- Support peers as they strive to make positive changes and explore how to work towards their goals;
- Explore with peers the availability of existing resources, empower and support peers in contacting and accessing appropriate existing services such as the Employee Assistance Program, employee networks, community services (not strictly mental health), health care providers and other services to meet the various needs expressed, as required;
- Assist with workplace education and promote awareness, as required;
- Report non-denominational information on support rendered using the provided reporting tool;
- Perform other peer support administrative duties, as defined in training;
- Avoid conflicts of interest by not providing peer support to peers who may be related or in conflict with each other;
- Agree and abide by the ESDC Code of Conduct and the Peer Supporter Guideline of Conduct (Appendix B);
- To their discretion, report any issues to either to the Liaison Officer or to the PSP Management Office in a timely manner;
- Maintain regular contact with the Liaison Officer to raise questions or concerns as a result of providing Peer Support and brief on trends, challenges or promising practices;
- Attend Peer Support Training courses and annual professional development sessions to remain engaged and up to date with the evolution of the PSP; and
- Ensure that their activities as a Peer Supporter do not impede on their ability to perform the duties of their position.

## **ACCESSING PEER SUPPORT and REFFERALS**

Accessing is done according to a self-matching process, where employees seeking help will access a list of Peer Supporters on ESDC Intranet (iService).

Similarly to accessing other confidential services to all employees such as the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or the Office of Informal Conflict Management (OICM), employees are free to access Peer Support on their own accord and without having to request any type of approval.





Although most Peer Support discussions occur during breaks, lunches or before/after hours, in the event that the employee requires immediate support, it may be necessary for their supervisor to be advised that the employee will not be at their post for a certain period. Mentioning “Peer Support purposes” should be sufficient and should not be subject to further questions from the supervisor, similarly to instances where employees access EAP or OICM.

There are many ways for employees to be informed of the existence of the Peer Support Program. These may include, but not limited to:

- Management
- Human Resources
- Union representative
- Employee Assistance Program
- SunLife Disability Insurance
- Industrial Alliance
- Office of Informal Conflict Management
- Office of Values and Ethics
- ESDC Disability Management Process

## **REQUIRED COMPETENCIES FOR PEER SUPPORTERS**

Peer Supporters are trained to provide Peer Support to their peers who are currently coping with mental health challenges. Peer Support is based on a relationship of having lived experience in common. This in-common experience might be relative to one’s own mental health or that of a loved one.

Peer Supporters can inspire hope and empower others in similar situations by providing social and emotional support.

With personal lived experience, Peer Supporters provide support to employees personally experiencing mental health challenges.

Peer Supporters with experience through a loved one provide support to employees who have loved ones experiencing mental health challenges.

Peer Support Accreditation Certification Canada (PSACC) has identified the required competencies for Peer Supporters in mental health, as part of the National Standards of Practice. The required competencies can be found in Appendix A.

## **PEER SUPPORTER COMMITMENT**

The following is a list of commitments that are required of the program Peer Supporters:



- The Peer Supporter is a volunteer member of the program Peer Support team;
- The Peer Supporter provides support to their peer and is not a professional counsellor;
- Strict adherence to ESDC Mental Health Peer Support Program governance is required;
- The Peer Supporter must respect confidentiality, the infringement of which may lead to revocation from the team;
- A Peer Supporter may be requested to provide peer support on short notice but this should be on an exceptional basis;
- The Peer Supporter must ensure that their activities do not impede on their ability to perform the duties of their position. Peer support can occur during breaks and lunch times, and if necessary, before or after work hours. Although some discussions may occur during work time, it must be within reasonable parameters that have the least possible impact on operations.

## PEER SUPPORTER SELECTION PROCESS

The success of the PSP is based on the careful selection and training of Peer Supporters. Peer Supporters; must be ESDC employees; realistic all able to meet the two-year commitment; and have lived experience with mental health and/or addiction challenges, either personally or as a family member.

### *Expression of Interest Principles*

Program communications are to be done with maximum transparency to ensure that new opportunities are made known to all employees. This is to prevent bias, and establish trust and fairness in the process.

- At its starting point, a sufficient number of interested employees are to be assessed to guarantee a high quality of candidates;
- The most suitable potential Peer Supporters are selected based on assessments and a reference check, with special consideration on the candidate's ability to maintain confidentiality, and provide Peer Support in a manner that promotes the credibility and reputation of the program;
- Selection of potential Peer Supporters will also consider strategic program requirements (e.g., availability, geography, operational functions, type of lived experience (family, personal, addiction, etc.) to ensure an appropriate distribution across the organization; and
- Suitability of potential Peer Supporters is based on their lived experience with mental health and/or addiction challenges, their apparent readiness (including their positive state of recovery) to support others, their ability to relate with a range of other colleagues, and their competencies as outlined in Appendix A.

The Steering Committee oversees the expression of interest and selection process. It ensures that the process is communicated in a manner that promotes and sustains a grassroots approach.



### *Expression of Interest Process*

All ESDC employees will be made aware of the program with the assistance of a communication plan developed by the PSP Steering Committee.

Expressions of interest must be submitted in writing and include:

- Reasons for interest in participation, including how the applicant feels their lived experience benefits them to be a Peer Supporter;
- A description of how they intend to contribute to the program;
- A description of what they expect to get back from the program; and
- Identification of any worries/concerns they have about involvement in the program, if any.

Expressions of interest will be reviewed by the PSP Management Office and/or an external expert(s) with experience in mental health Peer Support.

### *Assessment and Selection*

The assessment panel will consist of the PSP Management Office, a member of the PSP Steering Committee, and/or an external expert with experience in mental health peer support.

The assessment will be based on the PSAC(C) competencies identified for Peer Supporters found in Appendix A.

The panel will identify those individuals recommended to become Peer Supporters. Selected candidates will undergo a character reference check by the PSP Management Office to ensure the person is respected and has credibility, with employee consent. References must include the employee's supervisor to ensure that the employee is in good standing and can appropriately manage the demands of their job and Peer Supporter responsibilities.

### *Supervisor / Peer Supporter and Supervisor/Peer Conflict*

The PSP Management Office will be brought in to act as an intermediary when there is a concern expressed by the Peer Supporter or a supervisor in relation to peer support commitments or in relation to an employee being allowed to access the Program. The PSP Management Office in coordination with the Liaison Officer will investigate the validity of the concern and propose a way forward for the two parties.

A Peer Supporter will never break confidentiality in discussion with either a supervisor or the PSP Management Office, unless exceptions stated in Confidentiality section are met.

### *Revocation/Relief of a Peer Supporter*

The role of the Peer Supporter is revocable, or subject to a relief, at the discretion of the PSP Management Office, in consultation with the Chair of the PSP Steering Committee. This action



is appropriate for, but not limited to the following:

- Personal health issues that impact the Peer Supporter's ability to support colleagues (note: potential suspension only - the Peer Supporter may be eligible for Peer Supporter functions once wellness is re-established);
- Breach of the Peer Supporter Guideline of Conduct;
- Failure to maintain strict confidentiality of peers, including topics discussed and personal details;
- Failure to follow PSP policies and directives;
- Acting against the recommendations of the PSP Steering Committee; or
- Continued absenteeism at PSP meetings or training sessions.

In agreeing to be a Peer Supporter, the employee agrees that the PSP Management Office may, at any time, after proper supervision and evaluation, for a specific reason or reasons, recommend revoking the Peer Supporter of their peer support duties. Revocation or relief of Peer Support duty will not affect the employee's employment with the ESDC, barring normal circumstances covering employment a public servant.

### *Revocation/Relief Process*

The PSP Management Office will investigate the details surrounding a potential revocation or suspension of a Peer Supporter. Results will be presented to the Chair of the Steering Committee for a decision to be taken.

Barring violations of the ESDC Code of Conduct, any action taken within the program will not impact the Peer Supporter's normal work duties, will not be recorded in annual performance review documents or employee's work records, and will not have career implications unless the circumstances also included significant work-related issues.

Work-related issues must be evaluated in their own right and not be confounded with Peer Support issues. Only work-related issues can have career implications. The actions of a Peer Supporter could have career/job implications if, for example:

- the Peer Supporter uses their knowledge of a Peer's mental health challenge to influence the Peer's manager or colleagues, suggesting the Peer is no longer capable of handling certain files or job responsibilities;
- the Peer Supporter violates the ESDC Code of conduct; and
- the Peer Supporter spends too much time helping Peers at the expense of their regular ESDC roles and responsibilities, negatively impacting their job performance in which case the job performance would be assessed and not the Peer Supporter's efficacy as a Peer Supporter.



### *Professional Development*

The PSP Management Office and all Peer Supporters are required to attend the introductory Peer Support training course and refresher courses or additional workshops, as may be required, at a minimum, every two years and preferably on a yearly basis.

The introductory course provides information and tools to help in providing Peer Support, in understanding constraints of breach of confidentiality, and enhancing the peer-to-peer relationship, communication skills, self-care strategies, and crisis management.

Additional courses will be determined based on the identified needs of individual Peer Supporters or as determined necessary by the PSP Management Office and/or Steering Committee.

## **BROADER EDUCATION/AWARENESS**

Significant efforts must be made to ensure that all employees of ESDC are made aware of the program through a comprehensive and ongoing communications plan developed by the Peer Support Program Steering Committee.

## **SELF CARE PROTOCOL**

All Peer Supporters are required to pay attention to their own self-care to discourage burnout or relapse. Several steps have been put in place to assist with, and encourage self-care strategies.

### *Peer Supporter Training*

The training course discusses self-care strategies that can be used by Peer Supporters. It is the primary responsibility of everyone to maintain, review and adapt self-care strategies, as required.

### *Personal Self-Care Plan*

Peer Supporters must continuously work on, and improve their ability to:

- Identify what triggers them;
- Gain introspection regarding their own early warning signs that their mental health is starting to slip;
- Establish clearly when their health has broken down to the state where outside intervention is necessary;
- Knowing what to do and preplanning actions for each of these three distinct phases is paramount for a Peer Supporter.



### *Support from Other Members of the Peer Support Program*

The work environment plays a pivotal role in performance and self-esteem. Peer Supporters are encouraged to remain in close contact with their Liaison Officers and also request the support of other Peer Supporters when necessary. In addition, the PSP Management Office is available during working hours by telephone or e-mail to offer administrative and program support on an as-needed basis. Should the PSP Management Office be unavailable, someone will be designated to act in the PSP Management Office capacity on a temporary basis.

### *Self-Care Activities*

Most people have activities or hobbies they find enjoyable and helpful in relaxing themselves. The range of such activities is as diverse as the people who engage. Example of these are knitting, reading, sculpting, hiking, yoga, biking, painting, collecting, watching movies, etc. As a Peer Supporter, it is very important that such activities be nurtured to assist in re-centering one's self, especially following intense Peer Support engagements or interactions. The ESDC PSP cannot mandate such activities but strongly encourages Peer Supporters to nurture these and remain engaged in them.

### *Personal Clinician*

If a Peer Supporter is attending therapy at the time of becoming involved in the PSP they are encouraged to continue with the therapeutic relationship for as long as is necessary. The personal clinician can assist the Peer Supporter to monitor and maintain their personal wellness and will be able to offer the appropriate clinical support where necessary.

### *Community of Practice*

Liaison Officers are encouraged to develop a supportive Community of Practice (CoP) where Peer Supporters are brought together on a regular basis via teleconference or in person when possible. The CoP is intended to provide connections across workplaces to enable sharing of resources and ongoing learning opportunities.

## **PEER SUPPORTER GUIDELINE OF CONDUCT**

The Peer Supporter Guidelines of Conduct (Appendix B) mirrors the Core Values of Peer Support work and describe the behaviours expected of Peer Supporters, in accordance with the National Standards of Practice established by Peer Support Accreditation and Certification Canada. All Peer Supporters are expected to abide by the ESDC Code of Conduct and the Peer Supporter Guideline of Conduct.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Maintaining confidentiality is vital to the success of the PSP. A standard rule of confidentiality applies to all peer support activities as well as all individuals who are involved in the Peer



Support program: names of peers and specific details about peer support discussions and interactions must be kept confidential. The only time that a breach of confidentiality can occur is in matters of imminent danger and in accordance with one of the following three requirements:

Confidentiality can be breached when there is:

- Imminent threat of harm to oneself; or
- Imminent threat of harm to others; or
- Suspicion of, or known, child abuse or serious neglect.

All Peer Support program members will respect confidentiality. Failure to maintain confidentiality will result in revocation of their role in the Peer Support program.

### *Questions/Concerns Related to Confidentiality*

In any case where a Peer Supporter is concerned about an issue of confidentiality, they should immediately contact the Liaison Officer and where necessary involve the PSP Management Office. The Peer Supporter should discuss the nature of the case without disclosing the name of their peer or any specific details unless a breach of confidentiality is required. The Liaison Officer / PSP Management Office may choose to follow up with an external expert for advice, at their discretion while maintaining confidentiality.

### *Informed Consent*

Written informed consent will be required from a peer before any information can be released to or obtained from another individual, agency or institution, (unless the breach is for one of the 3 reasons stated above in which case informed consent is not required). In the rare case where this is appropriate, if consent is obtained, the Peer Supporter may share privileged information for the sole purpose of engaging additional support for the peer.

### *Retention of Information*

At no point, will a Peer Supporter maintain their own sets of notes on peers being supported. Peer Supporters must only use the confidential database platform provided and ensure that any information entered in the database platform could not be used to determine the identity of the individual being supported.

## **CRISIS MANAGEMENT**

Despite Peer Support being identified as a non-clinical service for non-urgent situations, an employee finding themselves in a crisis may instinctively contact someone they feel they can trust and who will bring a sense of reassurance. Such a person could be a Peer Supporter. Once involved in a crisis, the Peer Supporter may not be in a position to postpone the discussion to a



time where impact on operations is null or minimal.

### *Requests Requiring Immediate Attention by a Peer Supporter (during work hours)*

A crisis such as (but not limited to): an intense and disruptive sadness or anger reaction, a panic attack, etc., evidently interrupts duties when occurring in the workplace, but can also greatly impact a person's capacity to remain calm, leave the workplace and access the appropriate help, such as a loved one or EAP. The support of a trusted and reassuring person to transition the situation to a more appropriate setting and resource is invaluable. It can be anyone in the vicinity at the time of crisis, but with a Peer Support Program in place within ESDC, employees may prefer to call upon a Peer Supporter.

In case such circumstances occur, Peer Supporters are asked to agree ahead of time with their supervisor on the most efficient and appropriate way to advise that they will exceptionally be away from their desk to provide Peer Support. Especially if they have to meet a peer in person or remain on the phone with them, a simple email or Lync message to the supervisor may be appropriate depending on the operational impact. **Each Peer Supporter and supervisor are to discuss and agree on what measures would be necessary in their particular operational environment.** Should they have questions or require advice, they are welcome to contact the Peer Support Program Management Office.

To avoid delays in supporting someone who may be seriously struggling or potentially being in danger, the Peer Supporter is trusted with determining if the conversation needs to occur immediately. They are not required to consult or ask permission in order to proceed, whether to their manager, to their Liaison Officer or to the Program Management Office.

Respecting strict confidentiality practices, Peer Supporters will not divulge the name or any details about the peer who is seeking help when advising their supervisor that they will leave their post. Mentioning a "Peer Support purpose" is sufficient and should not be subject to further questions from the supervisor.

Should the peer be met in person, every precaution should be taken to avoid the supervisor seeing who the Peer Supporter will meet, given they were informed their employee would leave their post for Peer Support purposes. In the case where this may be inevitable, the supervisor is entrusted with protecting confidentiality.

### *Emergencies and Extreme Situations*

During a severe crisis situation, where imminent harm to self or others may occur, Peer Supporters must not jeopardize their own personal safety. It is not the responsibility of a Peer Supporter to personally rescue any individual in a crisis. The Peer Supporter is not expected to physically intervene but rather to help the peer access the appropriate resources.





Peer Supporters must contact the appropriate services/authorities, even if they believe they could defuse the situation.

If, during an extreme/life threatening crisis, a peer is in contact with the Peer Supporter, the Peer Supporter must maintain the role of Peer Supporter and involve additional and separate resources appropriate to the circumstances. A Peer Supporter should not leave a peer alone unless the Peer Supporter's personal safety is at risk.

If they are speaking by phone every effort must be made to not hang up on the person. If at all possible another means should be used to contact additional resources such as 911.

If weapons are known to exist, the Peer Supporter should call emergency services and forewarn them of the weapon. Peer Supporters must never place themselves at risk by attempting to defuse a situation involving weapons.

In summary and in accordance with the [ESDC Emergency Management and Business Continuity guidelines for Medical Emergencies](#) or for [Threatening Messages](#) , the Peer Supporter should adhere to the following crisis protocol:

- Do not jeopardize own health or safety;
- Listen carefully to the needs and imminent problem;
- Assess the situation and identify the appropriate resource to address the situation;
- Help the peer determine if, and which community resource would be most helpful, and help the peer to overcome any roadblocks to accessing the resource;
- In cases where confidentiality must be breached, reach out to authorities (Police, EMS, Child Protective Services etc.) and ensure contacts are appropriately made;
- Inform the Liaison Officer and PSP Management Office and discuss other actions that may need to be taken;
- Attempt to stay connected to the peer, but remain at arms-length from the crisis per se: simply continue to be supportive;
- Proactively monitor self-care and ensure you remain engaged in self-care activities, especially following the crisis; and
- Follow up with the peer following the crisis.

All Peer Supporters need to be fully aware that they can be negatively affected by another's crisis. Self-care strategies must be exercised on a regular basis to foster personal wellness. When involved in a crisis situation, the Peer Supporter must report to their PSP Management Office to discuss the situation and reflect on the event. The PSP Management Office, in consultation with the Peer Supporter, will determine whether it is appropriate for the Peer Supporter to contact the PSAC(C) Community of Practice or a professional clinician for reframing or additional support.



## **BOUNDARIES**

In working with peers, there will be many occasions when Peer Supporters must remind themselves that the role of a Peer Supporter is to LISTEN and SUPPORT. The Peer Supporter Guideline of Conduct is quite explicit in this regard and the Peer Supporter is expected to understand and comply with it.

Peer Supporters are not advocates. There may however be a time for advocacy on behalf of a peer. The Peer Supporter, in consultation with the Liaison Officer and PSP Management Office, will carefully weigh each situation and attempt to maximize support and empower the peer in making their own decisions in dealing with the situation.

Overstepping boundaries may also put the Peer Supporter in the position where they become, in the peer's mind, responsible for the outcome of events thereafter. By giving specific direction to the peer or taking over the situation, the Peer Supporter may interfere or conflict with another service or care provider (i.e. Employee Assistance Program, Health Care Professionals) who is working with the peer. A Peer Supporter may feel justified in telling a peer who seems overwhelmed what to do or to act on behalf of the peer. However, this may increase the peer's sense of helplessness and delay the peer from gaining back control of their life and their decisions.

A Peer Supporter will need to understand when it is time to transfer support to another resource. The policies and procedures provide a framework for managing boundaries. In most cases, Peer Supporters can further avoid boundary conflicts by:

- Developing strong positive working relationships with other Peer Supporters within the organization to facilitate open and ongoing discussions on issues as they arise (while maintaining confidentiality);
- Consulting with the PSP Management Office in cases of difficulty;
- Respecting the mandate and dedication of all other professionals who work with peers;
- Realizing that in many cases no one individual, including the peer being supported, is aware of all factors that are involved in a situation;
- Avoiding giving direct advice on a subject which the Peer Supporter is not qualified to comment on, including: personal health care, medication, benefits being received; and
- Avoiding potential conflicts of interest, such as providing Peer Support to colleagues who may be related or in conflict with each other.

## **PROGRAM EVALUATION**

The effectiveness of the program will be assessed by a comprehensive evaluation strategy.

### *Peer Supporter Reports*

For program assessment and budget development purposes, Peer Supporters are required to complete and submit a Peer Supporter Report after each peer support interaction using the assigned platform.



Note: these forms are strictly for statistical purposes only. No reference to any information of a confidential nature is to be included.

## **RESOURCES REQUIREMENTS**

To ensure the continuation of the program, it is anticipated that resources will be required on an annual basis for the following:

- Human and Financial Resources
- Peer Support Steering Committee Quarterly Meetings
- Peer Support training workshop
- Suicide Intervention Training
- Peer Support team meetings/workshops
- Education material and publications



## **APPENDIX A - PEER SUPPORTER COMPETENCIES**

The following are competencies to look for when identifying and nominating employees as Peer Supporters. They are based on Peer Support Accreditation and Certification Canada's National Certification Handbook (Standards of Practice).

### **1. Communication**

Listens with empathy and without judgement; holding peers in unconditional high regard. Utilizes various communication styles and skills to improve understanding and adapts the style and tone of communication to suit the listener and the situation. Communicates using recovery language and emphasizes the strengths of their peers.

### **2. Hope**

Operates from a sense of hope, expressing confidence that others will be successful in their own personal journeys of recovery. Strives to model realistic optimism and a belief that even in difficult situations positive choices can be made.

### **3. Demeanour**

Is sensitive to what another might be feeling, demonstrates a capacity for non-judgmental empathy, and responds from an equal, genuine, and sharing point of view. Selectively self-discloses own experience in a manner that ensures the relationship remains peer focused.

### **4. Interpersonal Relations**

Interacts in a manner that honors the dignity of others and strives to build positive respectful relationships. Strives to make others feel comfortable and conveys genuine interest in the other person. Even in a difficult or tense situation they strive to maintain a level of respect and consideration for others.

### **5. Critical Thinking**

Engages in active listening skills to better understand a situation and recognizes that there is more than one way to look at an issue. Considers the possible implications or outcomes of actions and, when asked, will help peers to explore the outcome or possible consequences of various options. Demonstrates good judgement in respecting the limits and boundaries of their role.



## **6. Flexibility and Adaptability**

Open to new ideas, deals comfortably with ambiguity, and adjusts plans or behaviours to better suit a given situation. Willing to be open-minded and compromises when needed.

## **7. Initiative and Commitment**

Is dependable and carries tasks through to completion. Demonstrates good judgement knowing when insight or assistance should be requested from another and are trustworthy when working independently.

## **8. Self-Awareness and Confidence**

Interacts in a manner that demonstrates a balance of self-confidence with openness to the thoughts and opinions of others. Self-reflects and understands that personal thoughts and attitudes can influence behaviour and actions.

## **9. Self-Management and Resiliency**

Understands the importance of self-care and stress management and models the practices that work best for them to remain healthy while supporting others. Strives to maintain calm and diffuse stressful or challenging situations.

## **10. Teamwork**

Shares knowledge, ideas and resources with team members in a cooperative and collaborative manner. Strives to fulfill their role and responsibility within the team while respecting the roles and responsibilities of the other team members.

## **11. Continuous Learning & Development**

Strives to approach life and work in a curious manner, identifies areas where personal growth may be helpful, and takes advantage of opportunities to learn and develop. Recognizes the value of on-going personal growth and skill development and maintains a connection with a peer support community as a resource to stay 'grounded' in the work of authentic peer support.



## APPENDIX B - PEER SUPPORTER VALUES AND GUIDELINES OF CONDUCT

### *PEER SUPPORTER VALUES*

The integrity and intention of the peer support worker is key to the success of this delicate peer relationship. The Core Values provide the foundation for this important work.

- Mutuality
- Dignity
- Self Determination
- Personal Integrity
- Trust
- Health, Well-being and Recovery
- Social Inclusion
- Lifelong Learning

**Mutuality** – We value the empathy that comes from shared experience.

**Dignity** – We honor and respect the intrinsic worth of all individuals.

**Self Determination** – We honor an individual’s autonomy and inherent right to make their own choices as they determine their path of recovery.

**Personal Integrity** – We value interpersonal relationships that honor authenticity, trust, respect and ethical behavior that upholds our Guideline of Conduct.

**Trust** – We are honest, reliable, and accountable for our actions

**Health, Well-being and Recovery** – We value health, well-being, recovery and the power of hope for ourselves and others.

**Social Inclusion** – We respect diversity and value social justice.

**Lifelong Learning** – We value personal growth through professional and personal development



## PEER SUPPORTER GUIDELINES OF CONDUCT

The Guideline of Conduct mirrors the Core Values of peer support work and describes the behaviour expected of Peer Supporters. All Peer Supporters must abide by the following Guideline of Conduct:

- I will act ethically, according to the values and principles of peer support.
- I will treat all people with respect and dignity.
- I will respect human diversity and will foster non-discriminatory activities.
- I will honour the rights, beliefs and personal values of individuals.
- I will behave with honesty and integrity in providing support to peers.
- I will respect the privacy of individuals and maintain confidentiality within the limitations of program policies and the law e.g. potential harm to self or others.
- I will not knowingly expose a peer to harm.
- I will not take advantage of the peer relationship for personal benefit, material or financial gain.
- I will respect the boundaries of peer support work and will not engage in romantic or sexual relationships with the peers that I support.



## APPENDIX C – QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

### Q1. What is Peer Support for mental health?

**A1.** Peer support is a confidential, volunteer, non-clinical, mental health support that relies on the wisdom of individuals who have lived experience with mental health challenges of their own or those of a loved one and have found a path to recovery. Social and emotional support from a person with experience can inspire hope and empower others in similar situations.

### Q2. What is “lived experience”?

**A2.** Lived or real life experience is experience that comes from having dealt with, and or recovered from a mental health challenge. Lived experience can also come from the day-to-day exposure to, and/or caring for, a family member/loved one who is dealing with a mental health challenge.

### Q3. What is a mental health challenge?

**A3.** An individual does not have to have been diagnosed with a particular mental illness (for example, clinical depression, general anxiety disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, etc.) to claim they have lived experience. A mental health challenge refers to a wide spectrum of circumstances. These can include, but are not limited to:

- feelings of depression or anxiety;
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD);
- feeling overwhelmed or angry; or
- substance abuse or other self-destructive behaviors.

It also includes life challenges such as:

- marriage breakdown;
- severe workplace stress or conflict; or
- the loss of a loved one or colleague.





#### **Q4. What is a Peer Supporter?**

**A4.** A Peer Supporter is an ESDC employee who:

- volunteers to support fellow ESDC employees;
- has experienced a mental health challenge;
- is now in a positive state of recovery and/or readiness;
- has been selected through the Peer Supporter Selection Process; and
- has successfully completed the Peer Support Training.

Only employees who fulfill these criteria will be allowed to act as Peer Supporters. Their role is to help guide employees who are experiencing mental health challenges. They are there to listen, without judgment, and to share their own experiences. They do not provide psychological counseling or clinical advice and they don't address situations of mental health crises. Confidentiality is a peer supporter obligation.

#### **Q5. What is the difference between the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and the Peer Support Program (PSP)?**

**A5.** EAP gives employees confidential access to clinical support. The program will do a preliminary evaluation based the needs of the caller and connects the employee with a counselor or psychologist for consultation.

A PSP is a non-clinical intervention. The Peer Supporter is not a counselor or medical professional. Their role is not to make recommendations, but to listen and empower the individual to start building a coping strategy and finding a path to recovery. A Peer Supporter is there to inspire hope for the future because they have been through similar difficulties.

#### **Q6. How can employees get access to a Peer Supporter?**

**A6.** ESDC employees can access a list of Peer Supporters on iService, select one and reach out to them directly (at work), in person, by phone, by Lync or by email, in complete privacy, for a confidential conversation. There will be no form to fill in.

The choice of Peer Supporter will be made by the employee. Some will seek out a Peer Supporter who has similar life experience while others may be more at ease to disclose what is



on their mind to a Peer Supporter who has a different experience than theirs that is based on criteria such as gender, age, work location, mother tongue, role in the organization, member of an employment equity group, etc.

That being said, the Peer Supporter is responsible for determining if they can support the employee depending on each unique situation. They may help the employee select another Peer Supporter if need be.

**Q7. When will peer support occur? Especially for those working according to fixed schedules and highly operational environments, such as front-line Citizen Services, Call Centers, Payments and Processing offices, etc.?**

**A7.** Peer support can occur during breaks and lunch, and if necessary, before or after work hours, if agreed to by both the employee and the Peer Supporter. Although some discussions may occur during work time it would be within reasonable parameters. Programs in other Canadian workplaces have demonstrated that most peer support discussions actually occur outside of work hours. We expect the same at ESDC. An individual's job responsibilities must come first.

**Q8. What if I do not want anyone in my work environment to know about my issues?**

**A8.** Peer Support program is national in scope and can be done virtually. A Peer Supporter can be contacted at work by phone, Lync or email. Peer Supporters have no designated territory or regional attachment. An employee can contact any Peer Supporter regardless of their geographical location, and may select one that is at a distance.

**Q9. How will I have access to the Program if I don't run into many colleagues because I work in a small office, I am a teleworker or am traveling a lot?**

**A9.** Peer Support can be done virtually. A Peer Supporter can be contacted at work by phone, Lync or email. Peer Supporters have no designated territory or regional attachment. An employee can contact any Peer Supporter regardless of their geographical situation.



**Q10. Will measures be put in place to ensure employees' confidentiality?**

**A10.** Yes. Peer Supporters have to adhere to a strict Guideline of Conduct that includes clear confidentiality expectations, in line with current ESDC policies regarding Protection of Privacy. The Guidelines of Conduct will be enforced by the Peer Support PSP Management Office Office (not by the employee's manager) in case of breach, which may go so far as rescinding the employee's Peer Supporter status.

Further, when a Peer Supporter needs to meet with a Peer, it is important that management respects the confidentiality of the interaction between the Peer Supporter and the Peer. Consequently, it is expected that a Peer Supporter and a Peer leave their workstation to have a discussion without necessarily informing their respective manager. Should a manager have concerns or issues to be address, it should call the Peer Support Program Manager Office by e-mail at NC-HR-RH-PSP-GD@hrdc-drhc.net.

**Q11. Will the program be evaluated?**

**A11.** Yes. Data on program usage and user satisfaction will be cumulated and analysed to ensure the program answers needs. The program has an "ever-green" governance, which will continue to evolve based on the data collected and trends observed. Employees' confidentiality will be strictly respected at all step of the evaluation process.

**Q12. What if, as a manager, I am not comfortable with allowing one of my employees to become a Peer Supporter?**

**A12.** Any ESDC employee (indeterminate) will have the right to express interest in becoming a Peer Supporter. Part of the selection process will involve an internal character reference check with the volunteer's manager. An individual's job responsibilities come first. A legitimate concern that an employee may not have the ability to find a balance between getting their work done and providing peer support, would be factored into the decision to offer an employee to be a Peer Supporter. The decision will be communicated by the Peer Support PSP Management Office Office and not the individual's manager.

**Q13. As a manager, how would I manage someone who is not telling me where they are going when they are seeking peer support?**

**A13.** The cornerstone of the PSP is confidentiality. The program is designed to support all employees, but it should not be used as an excuse to get away from one's job responsibilities.



Most managers enjoy a certain level of trust with their employees – to ensure tasks are being completed; employees are expected to manage their time accordingly. Obviously in certain operational settings, employees are obligated to be on the front- line at specific times.

The premise of the PSP is that employees and managers have a relationship that allows for the kind of flexibility that would permit an individual to seek out and have a short conversation with a Peer Supporter, possibly setting up a time after work for a longer discussion.

This program is there to help ensure that employees who are dealing with mental health challenges can address those while still being productive on the job. It is always expected that employees will continue to deliver and perform their duties satisfactorily.

**Q14. What if an employee uses the PSP numerous times a day?**

**A14.** It is not expected that an employee would need that level of support from the PSP. If such a pattern of usage were to occur, the Peer Supporter would flag the situation to his/her Liaison Officer who would intervene and ask the employee to consider additional interventions, such as the Employee Assistance Program.

Usage will also be recorded and monitored on a regular basis and any inconsistencies with the PSP governance will be looked into without delay.

