

Nurturing Hope

A Peer Support Path
for Trafficking Survivors

RESEARCH REPORT

Project Lead: Voice Found

Research Partner: The Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking

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Canadian Centre to
End Human Trafficking

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Executive Summary

Peer support as a model of care and recovery is well established within mental health and addictions services. It is a model that enables people going through similar traumas and experiences to share, bond, and recover. Within the anti-human trafficking sector, peer support is seen as a promising practice, offering significant benefits to survivors. However, implementing such a model in anti-human trafficking organizations has not been as well documented.

Recognizing this gap in knowledge, Ottawa-based non-profit Voice Found initiated a multi-year project that explored how to ethically incorporate a peer support model within the anti-human trafficking sector. Funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada, the project — *Nurturing Hope: A Peer Support Path for Trafficking Survivors* — consisted of three phases:

- 1) Conducting research into the perceptions, benefits, challenges, and key components of peer support for survivors of human trafficking;
- 2) Piloting a peer support training and implementation program in four Canadian regions; and
- 3) Evaluating the program.

The Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking partnered with Voice Found to lead the research component of the project. The Centre used the following methods for gathering information:

Consultations with stakeholders: Service providers and peer supporters were engaged through key informant interviews and written submissions. A total of 44 consultations took place, which represented 34 organizations from various sectors and geographical regions across Canada.

Literature review: The review consisted of 49 sources and included academic articles, non-government organization (NGO) reports, and government reports, which were published between 2010 and 2025 from a range of countries. The sources examined peer support in several sectors such as mental health, human trafficking, and other forms of gender-based violence.

The research findings show that a peer support model has significant benefits for all stakeholders involved — peers/service users, peer supporters, and service provider organizations. Peer support fosters hope for recovery, reduces isolation and stigma, and enhances healing for peers/service users. Peer supporters benefit through personal growth, skill development, and empowerment. For service providers, peer support programming is a way to embed the value of lived experience in their organizations, creating more trauma-informed, inclusive, credible, and authentic spaces for survivors (both peers and peer supporters).

The findings also highlight the challenges with incorporating a peer support model in the anti-human trafficking sector. Success depends on both organizational and peer supporter readiness. Barriers such as limited funding, unclear roles and responsibilities, inflexible policies and procedures, and a lack of robust employee supports can undermine safety and effectiveness, risking burnout and re-traumatization.

The research concluded that peer support programs were most effective when peer supporters themselves were properly supported. The key components required to do this included strong supervision, training and professional development opportunities, equitable compensation, and additional mental health and wellness supports. The following recommendations ensure that these components are prioritized so that a peer support model can be successfully implemented within the anti-human trafficking sector.

Recommendations for federal, provincial, and territorial governments:

- 1) Commit to sustained and increased funding for anti-human trafficking organizations to develop, implement, and operate peer support programming. This funding should be flexible enough to:
 - Hire peer supporters and the necessary supervisory staff to support them;
 - Offer appropriate levels of compensation including wages and benefits;
 - Enable access to subject matter experts or consultants to increase capacity to embed lived expertise into all aspects the organization; and
 - Develop training tools and materials to help increase organizational capacity and understandings of the value of peer support.
- 2) Investigate the possibility of developing a standardized accreditation or certification process for peer support provincially and/or nationally. This process must be done in collaboration with those with lived experience of trafficking.

Recommendations for anti-human trafficking organizations:

- 1) Recognize peer support as an integral part of the team by providing clear role expectations, equitable compensation, and support;
- 2) Incorporate discussions about peer supporter roles, responsibilities, boundary-setting, and self-care in onboarding processes;
- 3) Ensure non-peer support staff have clarity on the role of peer supporters in relation to the organization, as well as their own positions, to mitigate any tension or misunderstandings;
- 4) Develop comprehensive and affordable training for staff specifically related to peer support in the anti-human trafficking sector;
- 5) Develop strong and clear safety protocols to protect peer supporters and peers, especially when they may have shared complex traumas;
- 6) Create opportunities for peer supporters to network and build community with each other, including opportunities to connect with peer support colleagues in other organizations;
- 7) Prioritize staff wellness to prevent burnout and re-traumatization; and
- 8) Educate partner organizations and the public on the value and function of peer support.

Introduction

Peer support is a promising practice for helping human trafficking survivors heal from their experiences. This model centres the lived experience of survivors and allows people going through similar traumas to share, bond, and recover from the complexity of their trafficking experiences. A peer relationship can increase understanding and foster recovery, creating a more comprehensive and holistic system of care for survivors.

However, there are significant challenges involved in implementing such a model in the anti-human trafficking sector. Without adequate training, resources, trauma-informed standards, or a recovery orientation, peer supporters can experience re-traumatization and burnout. Similarly, organizations may not have the capacity or the resources to meaningfully operate and manage such programs.

Recognizing this need, in 2021, the Ottawa-based non-profit Voice Found developed Ethical Peer Support (EPS), a 10-week training and implementation program for organizations and individuals using (or wanting to use) peer support as part of their work. In 2023, Voice Found received multi-year funding from Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE) to enhance, expand, and evaluate their EPS program. This project — *Nurturing Hope: A Peer Support Path for Trafficking Survivors* — consisted of three phases:

- **Phase 1:** Conducting research and engaging stakeholders to identify the benefits, challenges, and barriers to implementing and operating peer support programs in the anti-human trafficking sector;
- **Phase 2:** Piloting the EPS program in four Canadian regions (Western Canada, Prairies, Atlantic Canada, Central Canada); and
- **Phase 3:** Evaluating the program using an external evaluator.

Voice Found partnered with The Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking (the Centre) to conduct the research and evaluation phases of the project. The Centre is a national charity, established in 2016, dedicated to ending all types of human trafficking in Canada. As a national backbone organization, the Centre focuses on four priority areas: public education and awareness, research and data collection, convening and knowledge transfer, and policy development and advocacy. The Centre works with like-minded stakeholders and organizations, including non-profits, corporations, governments, and survivors of human trafficking, to advance best practices, eliminate duplicate efforts across Canada, and enable cross-sectoral coordination by providing access to networks and specialized skills. The Centre operates the 24/7 Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline, with multilingual access to a safe, trauma-informed, and confidential space to ask for help, connect to services, and report tips to law enforcement. While the Hotline provides localized and immediate support to victims and survivors, it also enables the compiling of data to help disrupt trafficking networks.

Beginning in 2024, The Centre initiated the research phase of the Nurturing Hope project to identify how peer support has been incorporated into the anti-human trafficking sector and where improvements could be made. The research focused on the following areas:

- Perceptions of peer support;
- Benefits of peer support programming for organizations, peer supporters, and peers;
- Challenges to implementing and operating peer support programs; and
- Components needed to successfully implement peer support programs.

This report uses academic literature and stakeholder interviews to provide insights into peer support programs in the Canadian context.

Terms and Definitions

The anti-human trafficking sector, like most sectors, encompasses a variety of organizations, services, approaches, and philosophies. Certain terms may be preferred over others depending on individual preferences. In this report, the following terms are used to provide consistent definitions to discuss peer support within the anti-human trafficking sector:

Lived experience: The survivor-informed expertise gained through direct, personal experiences in human trafficking-related circumstances. When ethically and consensually engaged, this experiential knowledge offers critical insight into systemic barriers and survivor-centred solutions, informing the development and implementation of policies and programs with authenticity, relevance, and respect.

Peer: An individual with lived experience of human trafficking who engages in a peer support relationship grounded in mutual respect, shared understanding, and empowerment. In the context of peer support programs, the term recognizes both the person's experiential knowledge and their active role in relational healing, distinct from clinical or hierarchical service models.

Peer supporter: An individual with lived experience of human trafficking who, through informed choice and appropriate preparation, offers relational, emotional, and practical support to others with similar experiences. Their role is grounded in mutual respect, shared understanding, and trauma-informed principles, without requiring disclosure of personal trauma.

Service user: An individual with lived experience of human trafficking who is actively engaging with services offered by an organization. The term emphasizes access to support while recognizing the person's autonomy, dignity, and potential for collaboration. In peer support contexts, it may overlap with the term "peer," though distinctions should be made to honour the relational and reciprocal nature of peer roles.

Survivor: A general term for someone who has experienced the trauma of human trafficking. Within the context of peer support programming, this includes those who are providing the support (i.e., peer supporters) and those receiving it (i.e., peers or service users).

Key Findings

1. Perceptions of Peer Support

Peer support is a well-established practice in sectors like mental health, addictions, and disability services, and its effectiveness has been the subject of research in those areas for decades. In more recent years, there has been interest in adopting this model in other sectors, including in programs that support survivors of intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking. Although its implementation varies across these sectors, there is a general consensus in the research that the defining feature of peer support is the centring of shared lived experiences.^{1,2,3,4,5} A peer supporter explicitly uses their lived expertise to provide social, emotional, and practical support to others who have or are undergoing similar — often traumatic — experiences.⁶ Reciprocity, shared respect, collaboration, equality, and non-judgmental approaches are often cited as core principles of peer support.^{7,8,9,10,11}

Consultation participants shared these conceptions of peer support, and summarized the role as follows:

- A peer supporter must have lived experience of human trafficking; and
- This individual must use their experience to connect with and support others in similar circumstances, as part of their role in the organization.

One participant described peer support this way:

“ I guess in a simplified answer, it would be somebody who has lived experience, has moved away from those experiences, and has grown and learned. They’re in a place in their life where they want to help other people by kind of being like a model ... Knowing that somebody has had lived experience has incredible value to [our peers] because they don’t feel like [staff] have [any] idea what [they’ve] gone through or what [they’re] going through.”

— SERVICE PROVIDER PARTICIPANT

Reciprocity, shared respect, collaboration, equality, and non-judgmental approaches are often cited as core principles of peer support.



Participants also highlighted the importance of lived experience beyond one single role or program. They suggested, for example, that strategic planning, program development, and policy creation should also be led, informed, and co-created by survivors to “promote positive changes to programming and policy.” Some service provider participants were already working towards embedding lived experience in all aspects of their organization. Others stated this was something they aspired to implement.

The importance of embedding survivor voices and experiences into all aspects of an organization was a significant focus in anti-human trafficking research. Ethically engaging survivors was seen as “critical in the fight against human trafficking,”¹² acting as a “reality check [to] guide anti-trafficking outreach, advocacy, service provision, research, and policy-making efforts.”¹³ This meant engagement beyond survivors ‘sharing their story,’ or taking part in one-time consultations. Opportunities to voice concerns, identify challenges, call out questionable — sometimes unethical — structures and practices were seen as critical. Equally important was the ability of those with lived experience to hold key decision-making positions to improve practices and ensure programs stay relevant to survivors.^{14,15,16,17}

2. Benefits of Peer Support Programs

The purpose of peer support programming is to leverage expertise from those with lived experience in ways that help peers/service users. However, there is ample evidence to illustrate the program’s benefits to peer supporters themselves, as well as for organizations that operate the programs. These benefits are interrelated, mutually advantageous, and can result in robust, community-centred approaches to service delivery. This section assesses the benefits to peer/service users, peer supporters, and organizations.

a) Benefits for Peers/Service Users

The available literature clearly documents the benefits of peer support programming for peers/service users. Such programs can have lasting impacts on the emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing of survivors. These benefits, which were confirmed by individuals who participated in the stakeholder consultations, can be summarized across the following themes.

“It gives [peers/service users] hope and the knowledge that they are truly understood and accepted because they know their [peer supporter] has been through trauma themselves.”

— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT



“ Having someone who has survived through sexual exploitation and trafficking and came out the other side inspires hope for people currently going through it. It shows that with the right supports and hard work someone can overcome those traumas and that change is possible.”

— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT

“ It is incredibly isolating for them [survivors] once they leave and having someone that can understand what this is like has been hugely valuable.”

— SERVICE PROVIDER PARTICIPANT

Mutual understanding: Peer support programs helped peers by connecting them with someone who had gone through a similar experience and were better positioned to understand where they were coming from.

This shared understanding provided the social support crucial for physical and mental wellbeing¹⁸ and offered a foundation for building trusted relationships in the future.¹⁹ These strong social connections could act as protective measures against revictimization, “creating a supportive community to ease re-entry, and reducing or preventing harmful activities.”²⁰

Enhanced hope and recovery: Peer supporters were a role model for peers/service users, providing a positive example of someone “cop[ing] with their traumatic experiences successfully.”²¹

Peer supporters were a “vivid and tangible example of hope and healing,”²² helping motivate peers/service users to believe in their own recovery and re-integration.

Reduced isolation, shame, and stigma: Working with a peer supporter enabled peers/service users to see they were not alone and helped them overcome feelings of isolation over the longer term.²³

This decreased peers/service users’ feelings of shame, allowing them to “speak openly and comfortably about their lives and what they face.”²⁴

“ Peer support ... allows us to see that we’re not alone ... you can feel that, like sense of belonging ... you’re not judged by something, and so then you tend to share something that you wouldn’t normally typically share.”

— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT

It could also increase understanding that what happened to them was not their fault and was not something for which they needed to feel ashamed, thereby de-stigmatizing their experiences and the devastating results of those experiences.^{25,26}

Empowerment, independence, and encouragement: Peer support programs provided practical support to peers/service users, such as developing coping strategies or steps to challenging negative routines, thoughts, and behaviours.²⁷ This support was an opportunity for peers/service users to increase their belief in their own ability to reach their goals. Consultation participants said peers/service users felt heard and seen and also had some autonomy in what they chose to share and how they wished to participate.

“ I think peer support is very important ...you go to peer support and all these people are like, they get it, you know, and these thoughts that you’re having, it’s like, oh, yeah, I have those too ...I would leave those peer support sessions just feeling so, so uplifted and so you know cleansed in a way.”

— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT

Participating in peer support programs also increased access to “information, knowledge, and competencies,”²⁸ leading to greater empowerment and independence. This knowledge could improve peers/service users’ ability to navigate service systems such as healthcare and legal supports,^{29,30} as well as open up employment opportunities.³¹

b) Benefits for Peer Supporters

The research indicates that peer supporters benefit greatly from peer support programming. As with peers/service users, there were personal, social, and economic impacts to participating in such programming. Peer supporters who participated in the consultations indicated that the peer supporter role brought benefits to them because of what it offered.

Personal growth and skill-building: The peer support role provided an opportunity to “gain skills, personal growth, and self-esteem through doing something worthwhile.”³² This growth and learning was reciprocal, helping both peers/service users and peer supporters better understand themselves and their experiences within a safe and nurturing environment.³³

Training and professional development were also identified as benefits to the peer supporter role to “enhance their working skills,”³⁴ which opened future employment opportunities. Peer supporters who participated in the consultations were appreciative of these opportunities. Learning how to facilitate conversations in a group setting (e.g., ensuring everyone had the chance to speak if they wanted to, redirecting inappropriate topics) and managing their own reactions during discussions were examples shared by some participants.

... peers/service users felt heard and seen and also had some autonomy in what they chose to share and how they wished to participate.



“ [Being a peer supporter] made me grow as an individual. Each time I see the benefit of sharing with others.”

— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT



“ Peer support work is an equal relationship with others where you share if you are comfortable to, and if you feel it will be beneficial to your peer, this sharing helps both the peer and the peer support worker.”

— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT

“ These trainings have helped me be able to equip me with various skills and knowledge ... and provide[d] me with information on how to navigate certain situations.”

— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT

For one participant, their role helped them “to understand the challenges and barriers that professionals face when trying to enact change,” something they did not fully appreciate when they themselves were accessing services and supports.

Empowerment, independence, and sense of purpose: The ability to use their experiences to help other survivors aided peer supporters in feeling respected and useful, and in reducing their own internal stigma.³⁵ In this role, they could “transform their often negative experiences into a valued asset which was of use to others.”³⁶ This ability facilitated a sense of achievement and competence, leading to greater confidence and self-esteem.³⁷

Responses from peer supporters participating in the consultations corroborated the findings in the literature. Many shared that they found the work very rewarding and that it improved their own self-efficacy or belief in themselves.

“ I find this work very rewarding. It’s an honour to see peers grow and heal.”

— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT

“ This has brought my self-esteem up and my mental health up and [it] feels great to do what I always wanted to do.”

— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT

In addition, this work allowed peer supporters to influence larger systems change. A “powerful motivator” for working within certain sectors was “in part drawn from the need to change these systems to provide a purpose for lived experience, and to offer others a different experience.”³⁸ Peer supporter participants echoed this and appreciated how they were able to offer a survivor perspective to inform programs and policies within the anti-human trafficking sector.

Healing: The reciprocal nature of the peer relationship enabled peer supporters to further their own healing. “Walking alongside” peers in their recovery journey “was found to be a clear mechanism of peer and peer worker outcomes.”³⁹ A number of peer supporter consultation participants similarly shared how their role as peer supporters helped with healing their own trauma and experiences. They brought up how the work improved their self-esteem and mental health. It allowed participants to be more compassionate and kinder to themselves. One consultation participant stated that they “found healing and acceptance through other survivors.”

“ I feel that I am where I am; in a healthy place, because of the help from others along my healing journey and that this work helps make me feel like I am paying it forward. This fulfills me.”

— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT

Participants felt grateful that they could provide a safe space for survivors to speak about their experiences without being shut down or misunderstood.

c) **Benefits for Organizations**

Findings from the literature review and the stakeholder consultations demonstrate the benefits of incorporating peer support programming to organizations. These benefits fall under the following broad themes.

Organizational change and inclusivity: The incorporation of peer support and, more broadly, lived experience was seen as an opportunity to improve organizations. The perspectives, experiences, and recommendations of survivors were seen as “essential to ensuring that programming and policies are ultimately effective and match the priorities and needs of those directly affected.”⁴⁰ The research further indicated that survivor perspectives were not only important for programmatic decision-making but should also be sought in broader ways. Survivor perspectives could help with “hiring, professional development, compensation, psychosocial support, program evaluation, and organizational policies.”⁴¹ By expanding the use of these perspectives, organizations have the potential to increase the productivity and commitment of staff members and create an inclusive culture where “individuals with varying lived experiences can feel accepted and thrive.”⁴²

Service providers who participated in the consultations echoed these benefits. Enhancing human resource practices and implementing equity, inclusion, and diversity strategies into recruitment and hiring processes were seen as steps towards shifting their organizational culture as a whole.

“ It’s created a culture for us where that is just the norm ... it wasn’t even a question that we were going to have someone with lived experience ... Being survivor-led has changed the entire structure of our program compared to how I think it would be had we not been survivor-led.”

— SERVICE PROVIDER PARTICIPANT

Participants felt that peer supporters helped build capacity and trust between staff. Peer supporters also provided opportunities for all staff to learn from the wisdom derived from lived experience and be exposed to different perspectives.

“ Peer support programming would help employees build empathy and understanding while creating a non-judgmental environment for the clients that need our services.”

— SERVICE PROVIDER PARTICIPANT

“ Those of us with lived experience might be able to see potential barriers or challenges that exist for folks, that people without that lived experience wouldn’t see. Tapping into this resource for policy consultation, and program building can have profound positive impacts on the organization and community at large.”


— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT

Credibility and authenticity: Peer supporters were seen as an “incredible asset” to organizations since they bring a lived experience perspective to programs and services.⁴³ Further, peer supporters helped promote a belief in the possibility of recovery while empowering peers see their own strengths and abilities.⁴⁴

Peer supporter participants mentioned how these programs provided credibility through “authentic, lived-experience perspectives.” Peer support helped to create a “bridge between survivors and organizations” and showed that organizations were genuine about holding the experiences of survivors “front and centre.” This bridge helped organizations “connect with the people they support, and tailor programming based on important feedback they get.” As another peer supporter participant put it:

Peer support helped to create a “bridge between survivors and organizations”...





“ I see [peer support] as absolutely essential. From my experience, although education is valuable, lived experience provides the most authentic support a person can give. True understanding comes from experience, and it is something no textbook can give you.”

— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT

“ [Peer support] gives another choice to their clients to speak to someone who might feel like more than an equal, rather than the dynamics of a client-therapist relationship. Peers have shared with me that they feel there is less stigma talking to a peer worker than a therapist.”

— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT

Importantly, peer support programs were seen as providing another support option for peers/ service users to access, “especially for those who might not be comfortable with therapy or found it too clinical.” This support helped to challenge and diminish the “saviour/rescuer complex that can often exist” within anti-human trafficking organizations, breaking down the hierarchy between service providers and service users. Reducing this hierarchy further added to the credibility of organizations.

Enhanced program effectiveness: The credibility and authenticity that comes with embedding peer support and lived experience into an organization

was seen to significantly enhance program effectiveness and quality of care for program participants. Incorporating recommendations from lived experience, for example, ensures that services stay relevant and use resources effectively,⁴⁵ leading to more successful programs. As one service provider participant stated:

“ Survivor inclusion is an essential component of ethical practice. It enables us to develop and deliver services that more accurately reflect survivor needs and preferences, which may ultimately contribute to better client outcomes.”

— SERVICE PROVIDER PARTICIPANT

Additionally, peer supporters who participated in the consultations felt that people would be more likely to engage with and remain committed to their programs if they knew the staff providing services truly understood them.

“ It helps connect clients to support that [they] would otherwise not connect [to] due to [the] fact that there is [a] trained professional that cannot relate to a vulnerable individual. Individuals that have trauma and mistrust in the system need help and they cannot or will not access it for fear of being hurt more.”

— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT

Research shows that peer support programs and the incorporation of lived experience also decreases the likelihood that organizations will unintentionally cause harm to survivors.⁴⁶ Consultation participants supported this finding, sharing how these programs could be safe spaces, “fostering a safe community in a safe capacity,” and allowing peers to “feel safer to access services from the agency.” This safety could extend to everyone, including other staff, with or without lived experience, which further improved program effectiveness.

“ Peer support benefits organizations by providing a safe space for employees to share concerns and receive support, reducing feelings of being overwhelmed and ultimately leading to a positive impact on the organization’s culture and bottom line.”

— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT

Finally, some participants felt that peer support programming had the potential to fill gaps and reduce work for other staff in the organization:

“ I also feel that peer support workers can lighten the load of counsellors and therapists (this can reduce the wait list, too) as not everyone needs the deeper amount of support a counsellor or therapist can give but do still need some kind of support that a peer worker may be able to give ... Some clients of therapists or counsellors benefit from talking with a support worker on the off weeks of their counsellor/therapist appointments, which has potential to reduce the number of sessions needed for counselling.”

— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT

3. Challenges with Peer Support Programs

Despite the substantial benefits reported by peers/service users, peer supporters, and organizations, the research findings also identified challenges related to peer support programs. These include individual, organizational, and system-level barriers that have significant consequences for all stakeholders involved when they are not appropriately addressed. Without thoughtful implementation, peer support programs and the incorporation of lived experience, more generally, can, at best, fail to achieve intended goals. At worst, the poor implementation and management of such programming can cause serious harm, re-traumatization, and exploitation.^{47,48}

... the research findings also identified challenges related to peer support programs.





“ Time is what will ultimately be the most impactful in addressing these issues. The longer the role exists, the more naturally defined and integrated it will become. This will reduce the tension and conflict that currently exists around it. The creation of written agreed upon guidelines would also be beneficial.”

— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT

a) Challenges for Peers/Service Users

Survivors participating in peer support programs can face a range of challenges, stemming from the traumatic nature of their experiences, interpersonal issues with fellow peers or peer supporters, program design and structure, and larger systemic or logistical barriers.

Safety concerns: Peer support programs pose safety risks for peers/service users. Disclosure of their experiences “could leave a person feeling exposed”⁴⁹ and vulnerable, hindering their recovery and healing. Peers/service users could also be triggered by listening to others’ trafficking experiences, leading to further traumatization.⁵⁰ Furthermore, encountering someone from their trafficking life (i.e., their peer supporter or another peer within a group setting) could cause significant emotional and practical harm, especially if it led to their trafficker discovering where they were. This safety issue was shared by a consultation participant:

“As we are a small community, we have also run into situations where girls are fleeing a trafficker that was connected to our own peer support workers in their previous lives.”

— SERVICE PROVIDER PARTICIPANT

Readiness and relational issues: Depending on how far removed they were from their trafficking experience, peers/service users may not be “ready to successfully manage peer-to-peer relationships.”⁵¹ Peers/service users, for example, could perceive their peer supporter as “unnecessarily enforcing a power dynamic or as being controlling,”⁵² mimicking their trafficking experience. This perception not only risks the deterioration of the peer support relationship but could also cause irreparable harm to both parties.

b) Challenges for Peer Supporters

The challenges experienced by peer supporters broadly included role ambiguity and expectations, boundaries and managing time, and burnout and emotional toll.

Role ambiguity and expectations: Although the research found general agreement about the definition of peer support, what it entailed in practice was less definitive. If the peer supporter position was not clearly defined in an organizational environment, different stakeholders could perceive the role differently. For example, peers/services users might view peer supporters “more like friends” since they are “expected to disclose personal information” as part of their work to build trusting relationships.^{53,54} Co-workers or colleagues might not view them as professional equals,⁵⁵ especially if there was vagueness about how peer support functions differed from their own.⁵⁶ This perception could lead to peer supporters feeling “part of the team ... [but] always of lower status than other professionals.”⁵⁷

This lack of clarity could also lead to “role creep.” Without clear and shared expectations, peer supporters may feel “unsupported in using their lived experience, potentially eroding peer support values and defaulting to a generic support worker role.”⁵⁸ This lack of clarity could also lead to peer supporters taking on activities typically offered by non-peer staff such as case management.⁵⁹

Peer supporters who participated in the consultations echoed these challenges. Several entered peer support work with some uncertainty, feeling that the position was not clearly defined and there was a lack of consensus on how the role should operate, which impacted working relationships with other staff in the organization.

This concern was especially pronounced when a peer supporter had accessed programming as a peer/ service user before becoming a staff member. Participants indicated that adjusting to this new dynamic could create barriers, at least initially.

Finally, peer supporter consultation participants expressed frustration with the perception that peer support lacks credibility, thereby making their work feel undervalued in the organization.

“ Organizations and government agencies seem to not understand the value peer support brings, instead they see it as unethical and a liability.”

— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT

“ When I moved into my position ... it was a bit of a transition in regards [sic] to peer relationships. I was once a participant in the program, so some of the people that I now support in my professional peer support role are the same people that I went through the program with.”

— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT

Setting boundaries and managing time: Given that many peer supporters do this work to help others who have a shared lived experience, boundary-setting and time management were significant learning curves. The “desire to always be available and responsive” to their peers, no matter the time of day, were strong for some peer supporters, especially “after rapport has been established” in the relationship.⁶⁰ Service provider consultation participants echoed this as a concern. Some shared that peer supporters may take on more work than they should because they relate to the situation. This increased volume of work meant that peer supporters were sometimes at risk of blurring the lines between peer support and friendship, making them vulnerable to additional emotional strain.

“ [I] initially had concerns about boundaries and ethics ... [and was] worried that a peer supporter might do more than they should because they remember being in that situation.”

— SERVICE PROVIDER PARTICIPANT

“ I tend to go over and beyond, always willing to go to bat for them, but have to remember that they need to feel as if they can do it themselves and that sometimes doing everything for them can create unrealistic expectations.”

— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT

Burnout and emotional toll: Peer support work requires significant emotional labour. When peer supporters face the organizational and individual challenges outlined above, burnout and re-traumatization can follow.⁶¹ All consultation participants recognized these as significant risks for peer supporters. Service provider consultation participants were concerned about putting peer supporters in, as they described, a “potentially triggering environment,” which could lead to “emotional burnout and secondary trauma”. One provider shared that they had had peer supporters who “relapsed and stated that they were very triggered by working with individuals in the same circles that they once frequented.” Another struggled with understanding how severe an emotional toll could be.

Peer supporter participants expressed challenges leading to potential burnout. This burnout could be due to the peer supporter participants’ own experiences “where a particular person or situation can feel triggering.” Burnout could also be related to the work involved in supporting someone and watching them continually struggle. Several shared how they used coping strategies and support from their supervisors and colleagues to reduce the risk of burnout.

“ As a peer supporter, sometimes I forget that I too need a peer supporter. Due to confidentiality, it can be difficult to explain to family & friends exactly what happened at work and why I am feeling a certain way.”

— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT

“ I had to learn not to take work home with me, and along the way, I have had to notice when I am needing time off and then to go away for a couple of nights to rest and reset.”

— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT



“ The biggest challenge is burnout and boundaries because it can be hard to distinguish between burnout and just being tired, especially for someone who has survived trauma.”

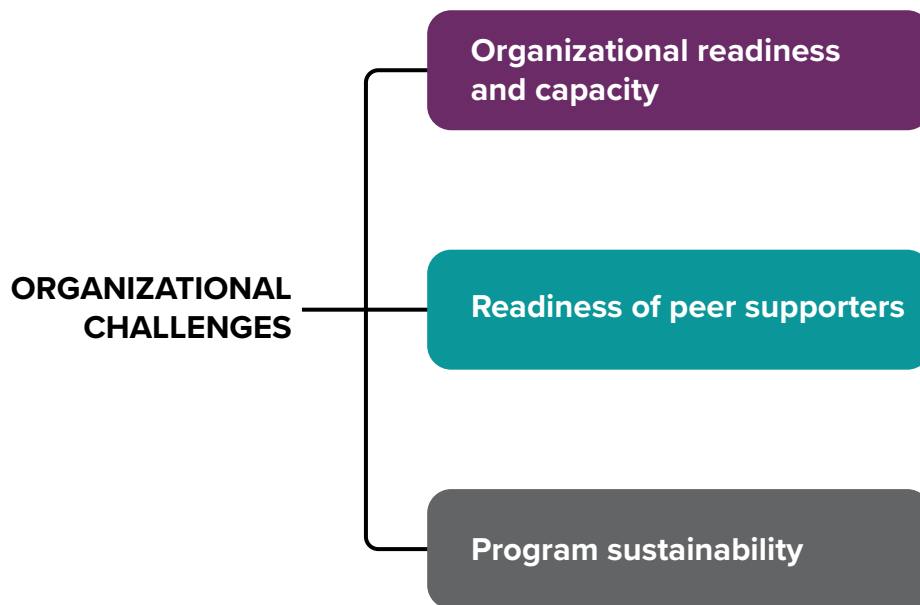
— SERVICE PROVIDER PARTICIPANT

For a small number of participants, safety concerns contributed to the risk of burnout. Working with peers who were aggressive, experiencing a mental health crisis, or who suffered victimization (e.g., sexual assault) during the time they were taking part in a peer support program, all elevated the emotional toll on these participants.

c) Challenges for Organizations

The organizational challenges identified in the literature review and by consultation participants fall under three categories: Organizational readiness and capacity; readiness of peer supporters; and systemic barriers and program sustainability.

Organizational readiness and capacity: As discussed above, peer support programming has the potential to change organizations and contribute to more inclusive, flexible, and person-centred spaces for staff and service users alike. However, organizations must also be open to such change. Even when peer support and lived experience is valued, existing organizational culture can impose constraints on peer supporter roles.⁶² If peer supporters are not able to bring their unique expertise and practice to their work due to current policies and approaches — for example, restrictive role definitions — the adoption of their role or program may fail.⁶³ Similarly, if non-peer support staff lack a comprehensive understanding of peer support in relation to their own role, they may express resistance or skepticism.⁶⁴ Organizations that are not willing or able to address these concerns are also not likely ready to implement and operate peer support programming.



This challenge was similarly identified by consultation participants. Service provider consultation participants emphasized the importance of having an organizational culture that embraced the value of lived experience in all facets of the organization. Not all service providers felt they were ready; ‘getting it right’ was a significant concern. Many did not want to negatively impact peer supporters or peers because of rushed or ill-conceived program planning and implementation:

“ This is [a] population that has had their boundaries violated in so many ways that we’re really doing harm to them as well if there are not clear expectations and understanding of roles.”

— SERVICE PROVIDER PARTICIPANT

Finally, service provider consultation participants were very aware of how peer support work could negatively impact peer supporters. They wanted to ensure they could properly support peer supporters through trauma-informed and flexible program design, supervision, and human resources. Not all organizations felt they had the capacity to do this, especially when issues of safety and personal boundaries arose. Some service provider consultation participants found it challenging to provide the “level of support required for peer support workers as they navigate the continued challenges in their personal lives.”

Peer supporter consultation participants shared ways in which organizational culture impacted their ability to work the way they wanted. For some, social difficulties with co-workers created tension. Others struggled with organizational approaches or policies that did not necessarily match their understanding of the role they wanted to take on. These struggles included differences in management styles, lack of supportive client resources, a focus on immediate versus long-term support, and their exclusion from case-management decisions. One peer supporter expressed frustration when trying to incorporate activities that they felt would benefit their peers:

“ I also had challenges bringing in pro-social programs such as outings, crafting, things for clients to do. I was met with the answer no, on a regular basis ... Management did not see me as part of the solution for helping clients.”

— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT

Some of these challenges were seen as a result of the recent adoption of peer support programming in some organizations.

“ The peer support role is still very new for organizations meaning that for many peer workers there is no precedence or guidelines to follow. This can make the role incredibly difficult to navigate at times for both the peer worker, other staff at the organization, and even the peer.”

— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT

Readiness of peer supporters: A common theme in the research was the extent to which those with lived experience were ready to take on the role of peer supporter. Participants agreed that not everyone with lived experience was suited to peer support work. This made assessing the ‘readiness’ of peer supporters an

important consideration in the hiring process. Policies related to the “length of time out of trafficking and/or emotional readiness to participate in staff positions prior to the interview process” were necessary to ensure peer supporters were prepared for the work ahead of them.⁶⁵ Service provider consultation participants similarly experienced this challenge. Some encountered what they considered significant issues when the fit was not right.

“ We had some challenge[s] with finding the right fit and there were some folks that really wanted to do peer support who had been out of the life for only a short period of time, who hadn’t gone through the counseling that they likely needed, who were really struggling with not even the weight of the work, but the weight of navigating life post trafficking, plus the work. And it wasn’t a good fit for them at that time.”

— SERVICE PROVIDER PARTICIPANT

Several participants were unsure of how to gauge readiness during the recruitment and hiring processes and struggled with finding applicants.

“ I had a couple of contract people and then we hired a peer advocate who we thought was ready and was not ready. And so there’s navigating that as well, like assessing readiness.”

— SERVICE PROVIDER PARTICIPANT

Some service providers addressed this readiness challenge by hiring a peer supporter who had been a service user. Hiring a service user made it easier to assess their readiness because they witnessed their recovery journey first-hand. However, there was a difference between “empowering victim-survivors more generally, to empowering them specifically to undertake service-delivery roles with their peers.”⁶⁶ Therefore, additional support was required to ensure that the transition from service user to staff was a positive experience for the peer supporter, existing peers, and non-peer support staff.

Systemic barriers and program sustainability: Literature review sources did not focus on larger, systemic challenges. However, most service provider consultation participants expressed challenges with being able to sustain or grow their peer support programs. Lack of funding was often cited as a significant barrier, including both the amount of funding and the length of time for which funds were secured. Without increased and ongoing funding, participants felt that they were limited in their ability to hire more peer supporters, provide appropriate compensation, hire supervisory positions dedicated to peer supporters, offer more comprehensive training and resources, and dedicate resources to shifting organizational culture. One peer supporter consultation participant also expressed frustration with a “lack of funding for community resources” that is beyond their control.

A close-up, high-angle photograph of a woman's face. Her eyes are closed, and she has a serene expression. Her skin is fair with numerous small, brown freckles scattered across her cheeks and nose. Her dark hair is visible on the left side of the frame, framing her face. The background is a plain, light color.

“ It is frustrating when you do your best to support clients and there are constantly obstacles your clients face that you cannot facilitate.”

— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT



“ If [it was] a regulated profession in the province, peer support programming would likely be incorporated into more settings.”

— SERVICE PROVIDER PARTICIPANT

Service provider consultation participants also struggled with evaluating their programs. Some tracked the success of their program in various ways, but the methods used often depended on resources, funding requirements, and the maturity of the program. Program outputs such as the number of sessions, participants served, referrals made, and goods and services provided were common measurements. Methods were primarily qualitative and gathered through feedback forms, pre/post surveys, conversations, and storytelling. Although most participants recognized the value of evaluation for securing funding and sustaining programming, very few participants mentioned undertaking a formal evaluation process. Many did not track or measure program success at all.

Finally, some service provider consultation participants felt that because peer support was not an accredited or regulated profession, its importance was not fully understood or valued by some organizations, funders, and government agencies.

Accreditation could offer more opportunities for professional standards and training, as well as more support for organizations when implementing programs. Accreditation could also lead to additional and sustainable funding. Literature review sources, however, identified a dilemma that comes with formalizing peer support positions within organizations. On the one hand, “many peer support workers are afraid that peer support values will be destroyed if peer support becomes too professionalized.”⁶⁷ On the other hand, “people recognized that peer support needs to grow and become more standardized, with nationally recognized training and standards that can be adapted at the provincial level.”⁶⁸

In other words, how can the role be standardized without deviating from “the core values and principles unique to peer support,”⁶⁹ such as mutuality and shared power?⁷⁰ An unintended

consequence of “institutionalizing” the role could be “to reduce the very centrality of experiential expertise, reproduce social inequalities, and paradoxically impact stigma.”⁷¹ And, if so, is this “really the peer support that we want people to put their own mental health on the line to offer?”⁷²

Much like peer support programs themselves, accreditation and standardization processes must be designed and implemented with guidance and direction from those with lived experience. Embedding lived experience in their development will provide an understanding of how such processes impact the role itself.

4. Successfully Implementing Peer Support Programs

How to successfully implement peer support programming was a significant focus of the research. Findings from the consultations and the literature review made it clear that peer supporters were the lifeblood of peer support programming. Therefore, effectively implementing these programs meant ensuring that peer supporters were themselves properly supported. The key program and organizational components required to do this included strong supervision, training and professional development opportunities, equitable compensation, and additional mental health and wellness supports.

Supervision: Regular and ongoing supervision was seen as vital for supporting peer supporters to help them “troubleshoot tough situations, ensure practices and interactions with participants remain ethical and effective, and promote open lines of communication.”⁷³ This supervision could take various forms. Service provider consultation participants stated they used regular meetings, informal check-ins, and open-door policies to provide opportunities to discuss issues and cases immediately. Some recognized the ability to adjust if additional supervisory support was necessary.

“ We quickly identified that our peer support workers require a lot of supervision support ... They have traditionally received this directly from the Executive Director in our organization ... [but] last year we also implemented a part-time supervisor support worker for one of the peer support workers as [they were] experiencing a lot of personal challenges and needed additional support.”

— SERVICE PROVIDER PARTICIPANT

Accreditation could offer more opportunities for professional standards and training, as well as more support for organizations when implementing programs.



Some participants also stated they used these touchpoints as opportunities to clarify peer support roles and responsibilities.

“ We also make it a point to have ongoing conversations around boundaries increasingly more so with clear expectations and also capacity.”

— SERVICE PROVIDER PARTICIPANT

Training and professional development: Access to a broad range of training and professional development opportunities was a crucial way to support peer supporters and ensure a successful and effective program. This included training specifically on peer support advocacy as well as more general training to develop relevant skills.^{74,75,76} Many service provider consultation participants stated they offered resources and training to all staff as part of onboarding processes, in addition to ongoing professional development (e.g., trauma-informed

care, crisis intervention, anti-racism/anti-oppression care, cultural sensitivity training, and support for mental health/addiction, suicide prevention/intervention, compassion fatigue, coercive control). Specialized peer support training was mentioned less frequently, but many participants expressed the importance of tailoring training to the needs of individual staff.

All peer supporter consultation participants went through an onboarding process and most received training in-house, as well as from external providers. The majority of participants spoke positively about the importance of that training, indicating that it helped them develop the skills necessary to support their peers.

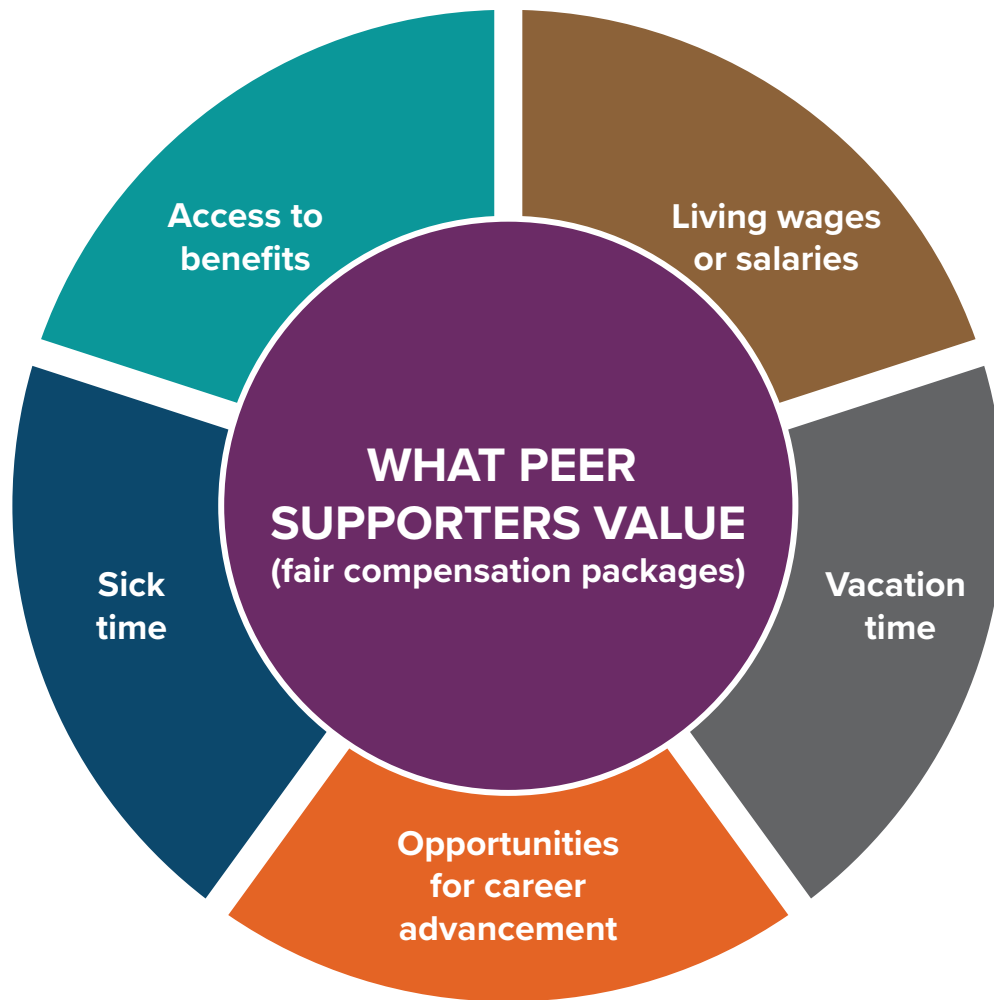
Peer supporter consultation participants identified two additional areas of training they felt would be helpful in their work:

- Training related to advocacy (e.g., how to hold governments to account, draw attention to main issues, and the impacts of policy implementation); and
- Opportunities to connect with and learn from other peer supporters, including outside their organization.

Equitable compensation: Fair compensation packages were regularly cited as one of the clearest ways to illustrate peer supporters' value within the organization. This equity included living wages or salaries, access to benefits, sick time, vacation time, and opportunities for career advancement.^{77,78,79,80} Whenever possible, full- and

“ Training was vital to my success with peer support. It gave me the best approaches for language, tips and tricks for inspiring hope, goal setting, and best practices. That is also where I learned about our code of conduct and the principles that guide our person-centred, person-lead [sic] approaches to peer support. It helped me with boundary setting, and the values that peer support functions from. It also helped me learn how to share my own experiences without traumatizing people and how to do it in a way that was about connecting with people and not just about sharing my own story.”

— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT



part-time permanent positions were identified as a preference over short-term or contract positions, which often prevented staff from being able to access those benefits.⁸¹

Multiple service provider consultation participants also recognized the importance of providing compensation and benefits on par with non-peer support staff:

“ The peer support worker is treated as an equal and valued member of the team. There is no differentiation in pay or value between professional staff and the peer support worker.”

— SERVICE PROVIDER PARTICIPANT

Responses from peer supporter consultation participants did not explicitly include the topic of fair and equitable compensation, although the financial security they experienced because of their job came up more than once as a significant benefit.

Mental health and wellness supports: While not as evident in the literature, consultation participants identified the importance of additional mental health and wellness supports that acknowledged the unique needs of peer supporters because of their lived experience. Along with employee assistance programs (when available), some

service provider consultation participants offered access to onsite clinical staff for counselling. Accommodations for personal needs, such as flexibility in hours or time off for self-care, appointments, childcare, and transportation, for example, were also provided by several service providers. In some instances, this was already part of the organization's approach. In other cases, it created an opportunity to expand these additional supports and accommodations to all staff.

When offered, this additional support was appreciated by peer supporter consultation participants and is summarized by one participant, as follows:

“ [M]y work pays for monthly check-ins with an outside counsellor to help me in any way I need, my employer meets with me monthly to see if there is anything I am struggling with, need anything, or am not happy with, etc., work pays for any education I am interested in taking, gives us paid time off ... on top of paying us vacation pay, and supports us when we need to take personal days or time off. Having all of these supports at work helps me to be the healthiest version of myself, and the continued education helps to keep me feeling like I am better able to support my peers.”

— PEER SUPPORTER PARTICIPANT

Recommendations

The benefits and challenges of peer support programs mentioned above are of the utmost importance. Addressing the challenges, however, is not the sole responsibility of any one body or organization. The following recommendations are based on the research findings and prioritize the key components necessary for the successful implementation of peer support programming in the anti-human trafficking sector. These recommendations are aimed at governments (federal, provincial, and territorial) as well as anti-human trafficking organizations.

For Federal and Provincial/Territorial Governments

- 1) Commit to sustained and increased funding for anti-human trafficking organizations to develop, implement, and operate peer support programming. This funding should be flexible enough to:
 - Hire peer supporters and the necessary supervisory staff to support them;
 - Offer appropriate levels of compensation including wages and benefits;
 - Enable access to subject matter experts or consultants to increase capacity to embed lived expertise into all aspects the organization; and
 - Develop training tools and materials to help increase organizational capacity and understanding of the value of peer support.
- 2) Investigate the possibility of developing a standardized accreditation or certification process for peer support provincially and/or nationally. This process must be done in collaboration with those with lived experience of trafficking.

For Anti-Human Trafficking Organizations

- 1) Recognize peer support as an integral part of the team by providing clear role expectations, equitable compensation and support;
- 2) Incorporate discussions about peer supporter roles, responsibilities, boundary-setting, and self-care in onboarding processes;
- 3) Ensure non-peer support staff have clarity on the role of peer supporters in relation to the organization, as well as their own positions to mitigate any tension or misunderstandings;
- 4) Develop comprehensive and affordable training for staff specifically related to peer support in the anti-human trafficking sector;
- 5) Develop strong and clear safety protocols to protect peer supporters and peers, especially when they may have shared complex traumas;
- 6) Create opportunities for peer supporters to network and build community with each other, including opportunities to connect with peer support colleagues in other organizations;
- 7) Prioritize staff wellness to prevent burnout and re-traumatization; and
- 8) Educate partner organizations and the public on the value and function of peer support.

Conclusion

The available literature and direct feedback from those involved in peer support indicate that these programs can be transformative in anti-human trafficking work and provide benefits for all stakeholders involved — peers/service users, peer supporters, and service organizations. For peers/service users, peer support programs can provide enhanced hope and recovery, reduce their feelings of isolation, shame, and stigma, and be empowering for their post-trafficking lives. Peer supporters can benefit both professionally and personally from this role. Opportunities for skill-building and personal growth, while being appropriately compensated and supported by their organization can be similarly empowering, help with their own ongoing healing, and foster independence and a sense of purpose. For service providers, peer support programming can be a way to embed and embrace the value of lived experience, creating an organizational culture that is more inclusive, trauma-informed, and person-centred. This commitment adds credibility and authenticity to their work, ultimately enhancing their effectiveness and improving outcomes for human trafficking survivors accessing their services.

However, the findings also highlight the challenges that exist when developing, implementing, and operating peer support programming within the anti-human trafficking sector. Readiness, of organizations and peer supporters alike, is a crucial requirement for the successful implementation of such programming. System level barriers such as lack of funding play a role, but service providers must also have the organizational culture and capacity to manage peer support programs. This increased capacity can be achieved through inclusive and flexible policies and procedures, clearly defined roles and responsibilities, the authentic incorporation of lived experience within all aspects of the organization, and comprehensive supports for staff (i.e., supervision, ongoing training and professional development, equitable compensation, and mental health and wellness supports). If absent, service providers may compromise the wellbeing and safety of their peer supporters and the peers/service users accessing their services, risking burnout and re-traumatization.

The recommendations provided in this report address these challenges at both the program and systemic levels. Their implementation has the potential to strengthen peer support programming within the anti-human trafficking sector as a whole and create a system in which survivors of human trafficking, as peer supporters and service users, have the opportunity to heal and thrive.

Appendices

Appendix A: Methodology

LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review was conducted to understand current research related to peer support programming in the anti-human trafficking sector. The following key words were used to search online sources:

- peer support programs
- peer support workers
- peer supporters
- peer mentors
- anti-human trafficking
- human trafficking

Due to the limited availability of (and lack of a centralized location for) publications on anti-human trafficking programming, the search was expanded to include peer support research in related fields, such as mental health, addictions, and other forms of gender-based violence (e.g., intimate partner violence, sexual assault). These adjacent fields were chosen because of their similar emphasis on trauma-informed peer support that use service user-centred models of care. Insights from peer support research in these areas have the potential to be adapted to meet the specific needs of human trafficking survivors.

For a breakdown of the literature review sources, see [Appendix B](#).

STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATIONS

This research project engaged key stakeholders, including peer supporters and service providers with experience (or an interest in) incorporating peer support into their programming. A variety of methods were used to promote the project and recruit participants, including targeted email invitations, newsletters, social media posts, and direct outreach to organizations. Once consultations began, participants also provided referrals and recommendations for other organizations and individuals, resulting in additional participation.

Consultations occurred in two rounds:

- **Round 1:** Focused on service providers, although a few peer supporters were referred to the researchers by the organizations that participated.
- **Round 2:** Focused on peer supporters as they were assessed and onboarded for the training cohorts.

Participants could provide their feedback through one-on-one key informant interviews or in writing. Service providers and peer supporters were provided with a background document on the project (see [Appendices D, E](#)), a consent form (see [Appendix F](#)), and a list of questions prior to taking part in the research. They were also offered an opportunity to connect briefly with the researcher before deciding to participate to discuss any questions or concerns about the process.

Interviews were documented using the Microsoft Teams transcription feature. The transcripts and written submissions were then cleaned and compiled before being analyzed by manually identifying and categorizing themes. Research materials that contained any confidential and personal information (e.g., raw transcripts, original submissions) were destroyed once the report writing was completed.

For a profile of the consultation participants, see [Appendix C](#).

For more information on the data collection tools, see [Appendices D, E, and F](#).

LIMITATIONS

This study faced a series of challenges that limited the breadth of the results.

There was an absence of available studies: The literature review was limited by the lack of studies specifically related to peer support programming for human trafficking survivors. Although the review was broadened to include other sectors (e.g., mental health, gender-based violence), the narrow scope of many studies constrains how findings can be applied to other populations. Human trafficking survivors face unique challenges that may not always be addressed in other peer support interventions. Looking at findings from studies on intimate partner violence and sexual assault, for example, can be beneficial to structuring a peer support program, but may have to be adjusted to address the specific needs and circumstances of human trafficking survivors.

Available studies were limited in scope: The review was limited by the type of research conducted, the types of peer support models studied, and the lack of common evaluation tools. Most of the available research was not longitudinal in nature, making it difficult to understand how effective these programs would be over longer durations (e.g., months and years). Different types of programs (e.g., online, in-person, one-on-one support, group facilitation) also make it hard to apply findings broadly across all settings. It became clear that there is no standard way to measure the success of peer support programs, leading to mixed results in different studies.

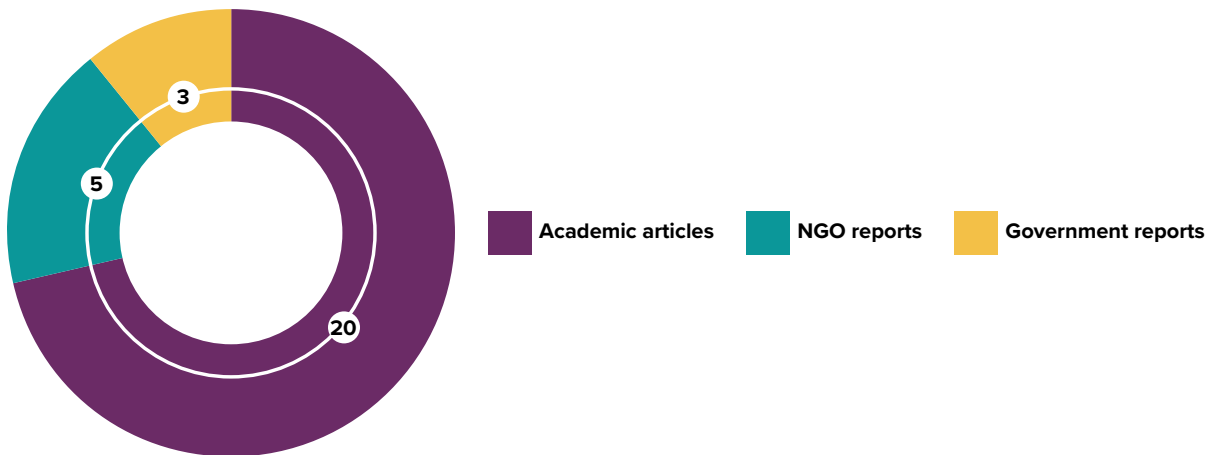
Negative feedback was often missing: Many studies focused primarily on the benefits of peer support and often overlooked negative outcomes for peer supporters, service providers, and peers/service users. The absence of critical feedback makes it difficult to understand and address the risks involved with implementing and operating peer support programming. Similarly, stakeholder engagement was limited by the perspectives of those who took part in the consultations. Most participants already had a positive view of peer support and had incorporated some form of peer-to-peer work into their programming. These participants did identify challenges or barriers during the consultations. However, the consultations did not engage anyone who had very negative experiences of peer support or had misgivings about peer support more generally.

There was some uneven engagement across geographic locations: Despite concerted efforts to include perspectives from across Canada, some areas of the country were better represented than others (see [Appendix B](#) for geographic locations of participants). Although similarities in understanding and implementing peer support exist broadly, certain nuances based on regional differences are likely missing.

Appendix B: Breakdown of Literature Review Sources

The review consisted of 49 sources, 28 of which were used in this report. Of those 28, the majority (20) were academic articles, followed by 5 non-government organization (NGO) reports, and 3 government reports.

Chart 1: Type of Source



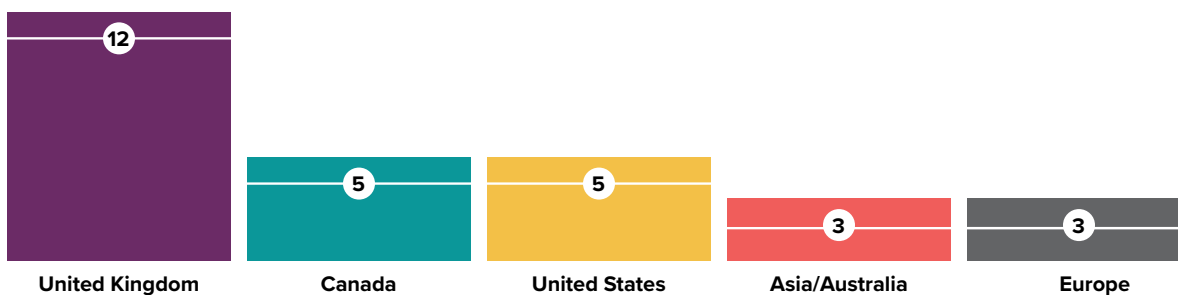
Most of the sources were published between 2016 and 2020 (12) and between 2021 and 2025 (12). Four (4) were published between 2010 and 2015.

Chart 2: Year of Publication



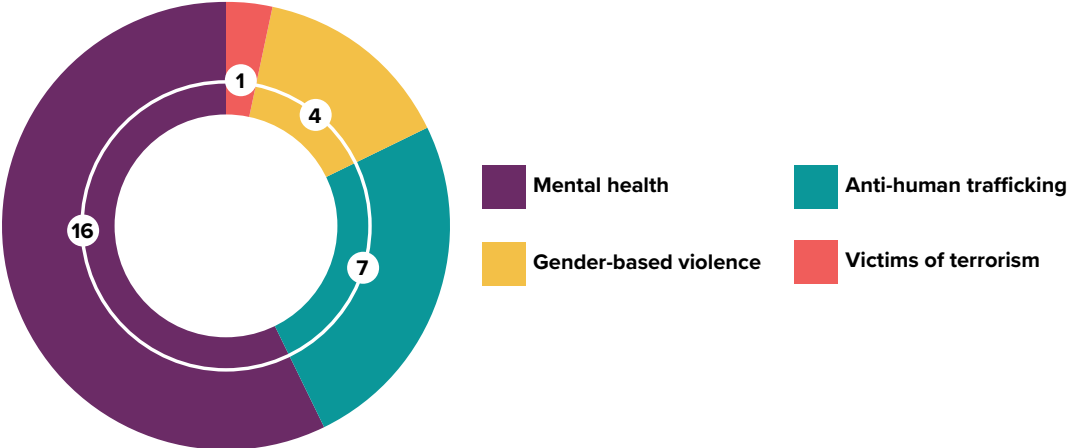
Most of the sources were published in the United Kingdom (12), followed by Canada (5), the United States (5), Europe (3), and Asia/Australia (3).

Chart 3: Publication Location



The mental health sector (16) comprised the majority of sources, followed by anti-human trafficking (7), and other forms of gender-based violence (4). One (1) article focused on victims of terrorism.

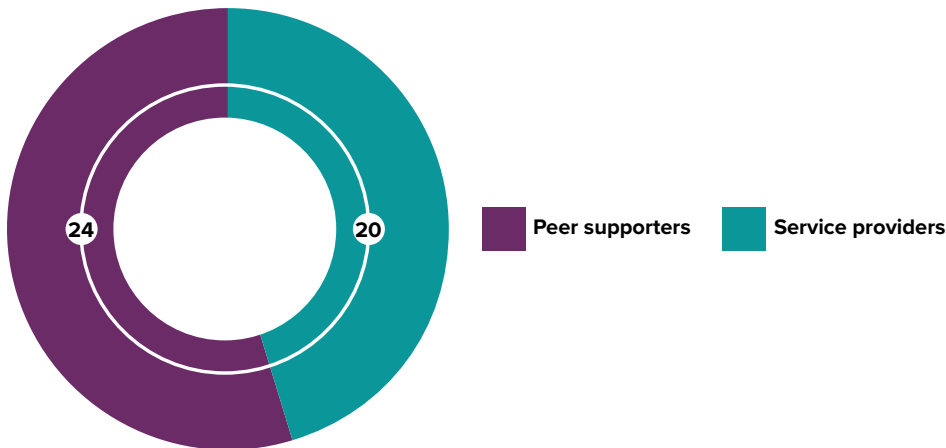
Chart 4: Sources by Sector



Appendix C: Profile of Consultation Participants

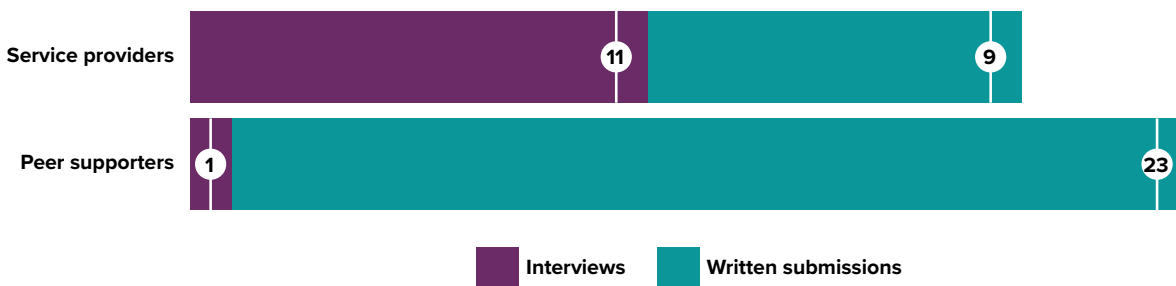
A total of 44 consultations took place during the research phase of this project. Participants included both service providers and peer supporters. Service provider consultation participants held leadership roles in their organization and were responsible for overseeing programs. Peer supporter consultation participants were staff within these organizations and/or were taking part in the training cohorts during the project's second phase. Thirty-four (34) organizations were represented in this consultation process.

Chart 5: Consultation Participants



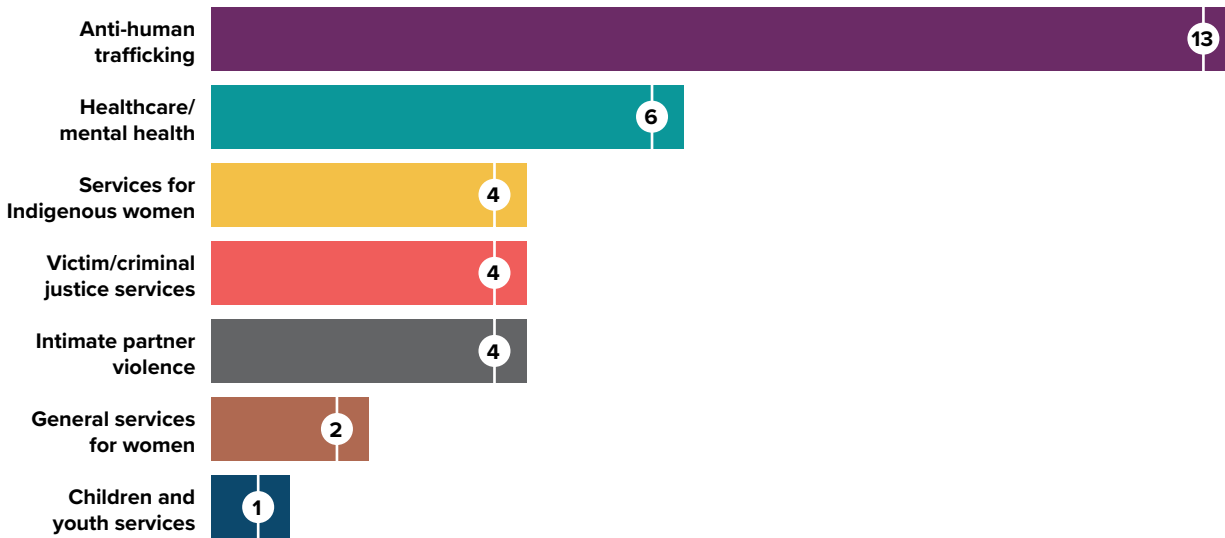
Participants were offered two options to participate in this study: engaging in a one-on-one virtual interview or providing a written submission. The majority of service providers (11) chose to have a discussion with the researchers in a one-hour interview. Almost all peer supporters (23) shared their feedback in writing.

Chart 6: Type of Participation



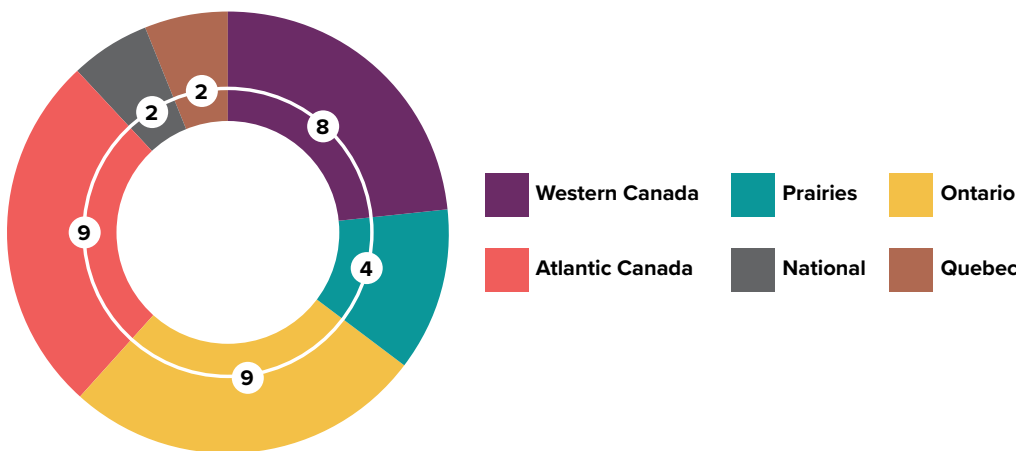
Of the 34 organizations that were engaged in this research, the majority provided services solely to human trafficking survivors or operated at least one human trafficking-specific program alongside programs for other population groups (13). In addition to the anti-human trafficking sector, organizations were represented from the following sectors: healthcare/mental health (13), services for Indigenous women (4), victim/criminal justice services (4), intimate partner violence (4), general services for women (2), and one (1) for children and youth services.

Chart 7: Type of Organization



Input was gathered from organizations across the country. Most participants were located in Atlantic Canada (Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland and Labrador) and Ontario, followed by Western Canada (Alberta and British Columbia), and the Prairie provinces (Saskatchewan and Manitoba). Two organizations provided services in Québec, and two provided services at the national level. No organizations participated from the Territories.

Chart 8: Geographic Location



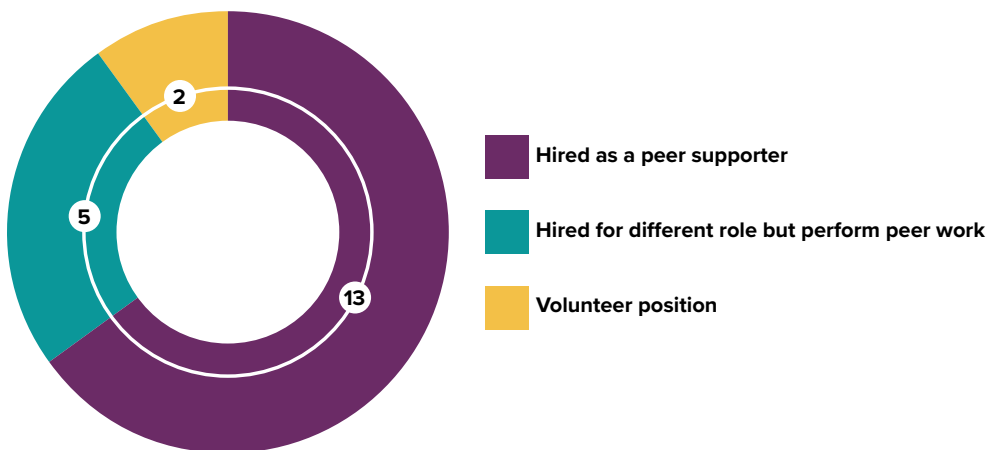
Of the 20 service provider consultation participants, 17 had some form of peer support programming in their organization.* Many incorporated multiple activities into peer support positions, such as one-on-one support (13) and group or workshop facilitation (6). Peer supporters in five (5) organizations were responsible for embedding lived experience into other organizational areas, including program and policy development.

Chart 9: Peer Support Programming



When participants were asked how peer support positions were integrated into their organization,** the majority (13) had at least one formal peer support worker. Peer support activities were also incorporated into an existing position. A small number of organizations onboarded peer supporters in a volunteer capacity or as an unpaid student placement.

Chart 10: Peer Support Role in Organization



* Information in charts 9 and 10 are based on responses from service provider consultation participants who stated they had some form of peer support programming in their organization. Only service provider consultation participants were asked for this information. Peer supporter consultation participants were not asked these questions.

** The number of roles (20) is more than the number of organizations (17) because some service providers had both formal peer support positions as well as staff in other positions doing peer support work.

Appendix D: Nurturing Hope Peer Supporter Information Sheet

WHO ARE WE?

Rooted in lived experience, [Voice Found](#) drives meaningful change and provides fundamental recovery support for survivors of human trafficking and childhood sexual abuse. This is accomplished through a number of programs and services including; primary and preventative healthcare through The Clinic, human trafficking support through Hope Found, and Path Found, and programs for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse through Strength Found. In addition, Voice Found delivers education and training on related topics and developed and delivers the Ethical Peer Support training program.

We have partnered with the [Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking](#) (“The Centre”) to undertake the research component of this project. The Centre is a national charity dedicated to ending all forms of human trafficking in Canada by mobilizing system change and collaborating with various stakeholders - leaders with lived experience, all levels of government, private sector businesses, and frontline service providers - to advance best practices and eliminate duplicate efforts across Canada. On May 29, 2019, The Centre launched the [Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline](#) (“the Hotline”), providing a confidential, multilingual service, operating 24/7 to connect victims and survivors, Canada-wide, with social services and/or law enforcement if they so choose.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS PROJECT?

This project — *Nurturing Hope: A Peer Support Path for Trafficking Survivors* — is funded for three years by Women and Gender Equality Canada. It will enhance, expand, and evaluate Voice Found’s [Ethical Peer Support](#) Program. This is a 10-week training and implementation program for organizations and individuals using (or wanting to use) peer support as part of their work in helping people who have been trafficked, sexually exploited, or experienced childhood sexual abuse. This program fills a critical gap in services by training individuals with lived experience to become peer supporters, ensuring that support is not only professional but also deeply understanding and empathetic. It also sets a benchmark for best practices in ethical peer support and, once scaled up, will contribute to the broader goal of sustainable systemic change in not only how peer supporters show up but also in the way support services are delivered to survivors of trafficking and exploitation.

In **Phase One** of this project, we will engage community service providers and peer supporters to better understand the current scope of peer work in the anti-trafficking sector. Additionally, we want to identify the challenges and barriers that come with implementing such programs, and what can be done to enhance ethical peer support training, standards, and practices.

In **Phase Two**, the enhanced training will be piloted. There will be five cohorts, one for each of the following geographical regions — Northern Ontario, the Prairie provinces, the West Coast, and the Atlantic provinces - and one for program supervisors/agency leaders. Organizations that participate in the research component of this project will have the opportunity to identify staff to join the training cohorts at no charge. Participation will depend on the availability of spaces per cohort and a readiness assessment conducted by Voice Found.

An evaluation of the training will take place during **Phase Three** of the project. Organizations and their staff that are part of the training cohorts will be asked to participate through focus groups, interviews, and surveys.

WHY ARE YOU BEING ASKED TO PARTICIPATE?

We are interested in learning from you. As a peer supporter in the anti-trafficking sector, we believe your insights are crucial for understanding the value of this program model. We would also like to learn about the program components that have helped you in this position, the challenges you have faced in your role as peer supporter, and what you recommend to address those challenges. We want to make sure that any expansion of Voice Found's program positively impacts peer supporters and those to whom they are providing support.

Your participation is voluntary. You can decide to stop participating in the research at any point during this process, or you can decide to take part in a different way (see section 7 below for the ways you can provide your insights). You do not need to give us a reason why you have changed your mind. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATING?

We do not anticipate any risks to taking part in this research. Your wellbeing is very important to us, and we have worked hard to design this consultation process in a way that respects your privacy and wellbeing. However, if something arises and you feel harmed in any way, we apologize and hope you feel comfortable letting us know so we can work to repair that harm.

By participating in this research, you will be able to share your thoughts, experiences, and expertise on peer support work. This will allow Voice Found to develop a program that can be replicated across the country, creating a more robust, holistic system of care for survivors of trafficking, sexual exploitation, and childhood sexual abuse.

HOW WILL YOUR INFORMATION BE USED?

The information you share will be used to enhance and expand Voice Found's Ethical Peer Support Program.

In addition to helping improve Voice Found's existing program, the research results will inform the development of tools and materials that share best practices and standards related to peer support in the anti-trafficking sector. These tools will be available to the public.

We take your confidentiality and privacy very seriously. That is why the results of the consultations will not include any personal stories or information that could identify you in any way. Only the research team will have access to the written feedback. You will have full access to your written submission during the consultation process. If you change your mind about what you shared with us or you have additional feedback, please just let us know.

WHAT INFORMATION ARE WE LOOKING FOR?

The following questions will be part of the written submission:

- 1)** Please tell us about your experience as a peer supporter. For example, how long you have done this work, how many organizations you have worked for in this capacity, etc.
- 2)** How were you hired for this position? (e.g. job requirements, hiring processes, program parameters, etc.)
- 3)** What training and supports have you received in your role as peer supporter? (e.g. in-house training, regular supervision, certifications, etc.)

- a. How has this training/support helped you be successful in your job?
 - b. Are there additional supports or training that would help you in doing your job? If so, what are they?
- 4) What challenges have you experienced in your role(s) as peer supporter?
- a. What are some things that helped (or would help) you address these challenges?
- 5) In general, what do you see as the benefits of incorporating peer support work into anti-trafficking programs and organizations?
- a. How has this work benefited you personally?
 - b. How does peer support benefit organizations?
 - c. How does peer support clients?

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

You will be **provided with a Microsoft Word document** that includes the above questions and space to provide your responses. You can answer as many or as few as you want. When you are finished, please email the document to the lead researcher.

Appendix E: Nurturing Hope Service Provider Information Sheet

WHO ARE WE?

Rooted in lived experience, [Voice Found](#) drives meaningful change and provides fundamental recovery support for survivors of human trafficking and childhood sexual abuse. This is accomplished through a number of programs and services including; primary and preventative healthcare through The Clinic, human trafficking support through Hope Found, and Path Found, and programs for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse through Strength Found. In addition, Voice Found delivers education and training on related topics, and developed and delivers the Ethical Peer Support training program.

We have partnered with the [Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking](#) (“The Centre”) to undertake the research component of this project. The Centre is a national charity dedicated to ending all forms of human trafficking in Canada by mobilizing system change and collaborating with various stakeholders - leaders with lived experience, all levels of government, private sector businesses, and frontline service providers - to advance best practices and eliminate duplicate efforts across Canada. On May 29, 2019, The Centre launched the [Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline](#) (“the Hotline”), providing a confidential, multilingual service, operating 24/7 to connect victims and survivors, Canada-wide, with social services and/or law enforcement if they so choose.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS PROJECT?

This project — *Nurturing Hope: A Peer Support Path for Trafficking Survivors* – is funded for three years by Women and Gender Equality Canada. It will enhance, expand, and evaluate our Ethical Peer Support training program. This is a 10-week training and implementation program for organizations and individuals using (or wanting to use) peer support as part of their work in helping people who have been trafficked, sexually exploited, or experienced childhood sexual abuse. This program fills a critical gap in services by training individuals with lived experience to become peer supporters, ensuring that support is not only professional but also deeply understanding and empathetic. It also sets a benchmark for best practices in ethical peer support and, once scaled up, will contribute to the broader goal of sustainable systemic change in not only how peer supporters show up but also in the way support services are delivered to survivors of trafficking and exploitation.

In **Phase One** of this project, we will engage community service providers and peer supporters to better understand the current scope of peer work in the anti-trafficking sector. Additionally, we want to identify the challenges and barriers that come with implementing such programs, and what can be done to enhance ethical peer support training, standards, and practices.

In **Phase Two**, the enhanced training will be piloted. There will be five cohorts, one for each of the following geographical regions - Northern Ontario, the Prairie provinces, the West Coast, and the Atlantic provinces - and one for program supervisors/agency leaders. Organizations that participate in the research component of this project will have the opportunity to identify staff to join the training cohorts at no charge. Participation will depend on the availability of spaces per cohort and a readiness assessment conducted by Voice Found.

An evaluation of the training will take place during **Phase Three** of the project. Organizations and their staff that are part of the training cohorts will be asked to participate through focus groups, interviews, and surveys.

WHY ARE YOU BEING ASKED TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH PHASE OF THIS PROJECT?

We are interested in learning from you. As a service provider in the anti-trafficking sector with experience doing — or an interest in doing — peer support work, we believe your insights are crucial for understanding the value of this program model. We would also like to learn about the successes and obstacles of incorporating peer support work in your organization and programs. More broadly, we want to gauge how interested community service organizations are in integrating peer support in their programming. This will allow us to develop a program that ensures peer supporters feel empowered, confident, and guided in the work they do with their peers. We also want to make sure this program that can be replicated across the country, creating a more robust, holistic system of care for survivors of trafficking.

Your participation is voluntary. You can decide to stop participating in the research at any point during this process, or you can decide to take part in a different way (see section 7 below for the ways you can provide your insights). You do not need to give us a reason why you have changed your mind. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. Members of the research team will take the time to go over this with you and answer any questions you may have.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATING?

We do not anticipate any risks to taking part in this research. Your wellbeing is very important to us, and we have worked hard to design this consultation process in a way that respects your privacy and wellbeing. However, if something arises and you feel harmed or triggered in any way, we apologize and hope you feel comfortable letting us know so we can work to repair that harm.

By participating in this research, you will be able to share your thoughts and experiences on peer support work. You may also have the opportunity to pilot the enhanced program at no charge and with the full support of Voice Found's expertise.

HOW WILL YOUR INFORMATION BE USED?

The information you share will be used to enhance and expand Voice Found's Ethical Peer Support Program.

In addition to helping improve our existing program, the research results will inform the development of tools and materials that share best practices and standards related to peer support in the anti-trafficking sector. These tools will be available to the public and we will share them with you once the project is complete.

We take your confidentiality and privacy very seriously. That is why the results of the consultations will not include any personal stories or information that could identify you or your organization in any way. We will be taking notes during our conversation so that we can capture your ideas and feedback. Only the research team will have access to these notes. Because we want to make sure we have accurately represented your thoughts and experiences, you will have full access to our notes throughout the consultation process. If you change your mind about what you shared with us, there are parts of our conversation that you do not want included in our results, or you have additional feedback, please just let us know.

WHAT INFORMATION ARE WE LOOKING FOR?

The questions below are intended to help guide our discussion. We are providing them now so you have a sense of the issues we are interested in learning more about.

- 1) What does peer support mean for you and your organization?
- 2) Is peer support currently a part of your organization's programming? If so, what does it look like? (e.g. program parameters, job requirements, hiring processes, resources that are provided, etc.)
 - a. How do you support staff in the role of peer supporter?
 - b. What type of training do peer supporters receive?
 - c. What challenges have you encountered with implementing and operating a peer support program?
 - d. Do you currently track the impact and success of your peer support program? If so, how?
- 3) If your organization does not currently have a peer support component to your programs, what is preventing you from doing so?
- 4) What additional supports would help your organization operate and/or implement peer support programming?
- 5) In general, what do you see as the benefits of incorporating peer support work into anti-trafficking programs and organizations? This can include benefits to you as an organization and to those who use your services.
- 6) Would you be interested in having staff from your organization participate in the Ethical Peer Support Program training and its evaluation?

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

You can decide how you wish to participate. Options include:

- Arranging a 1-hour virtual meeting via Microsoft Teams or Zoom
- Sharing your thoughts in writing by answering the questions in the previous section and emailing your responses to the lead researcher.

We can also arrange a brief video or phone call (15 min) a few days prior to the scheduled meeting. This will give you an opportunity to meet us, ask questions, or voice concerns.

Appendix F: Nurturing Hope Consent Form

We strive to ensure that you have every opportunity to make informed decisions about your participation in this project. If you need support, or have any questions/concerns about the purpose of this project and how we will use the information you share, please reach out to the lead researcher.

Please read through each statement and click the box if you agree. Then sign and date on page 2 and return to the lead researcher.

1. I confirm that I have read the information sheet – or have had it read to me – and understand the purpose of the project and the information that I am being asked to share.
2. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions about the project. I confirm that these questions have been answered satisfactorily.
3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to stop participating at any time or change the way I choose to participate.
4. I understand that I have control over my own information. I can ask to see my own data anytime during the implementation of the project. I can also ask for it to be removed and not included in the results.
5. I understand that my information will be stored securely and that only the project team will have access to it before it is compiled with other participants' information.
6. I understand that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained, and it will not be possible to identify me in any final materials or publications.
7. I agree to take part in this project.

By typing in your name, you are signing this consent form.

Participant Name: _____

Date: _____

Project Team Member Name: _____

Date: _____

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