

EMPLOYING INDIVIDUALS WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE:

MEMO ON FINDINGS TO INFORM WORKSHOP PARTICIPATION

September 2021

*Prepared to support stakeholders' preparation for the Council on Criminal Justice and Behavioral Health (CCJBH) **Solutions to Hiring Individuals with Lived Experience** workshop, September 13, 2021.*

BACKGROUND & PROCESS

In a multi-phased and iterative process, CCJBH has been engaging with stakeholders to identify issues and potential efforts that are needed to support individuals with LE, and their networks, within the criminal justice and behavioral health systems. Stakeholder input has been captured and documented by neutral facilitators from California State University, Sacramento (CSUS) and used and analyzed by CCJBH to formulate recommendations.

The initial phase of engagement, conducted in 2019, culminated in CCJBH establishing regional stakeholder advocacy contracts that support local community-based organizations, each of which are implementing unique projects that include individuals with LE to help reduce justice involvement of individuals with behavioral health needs. In December 2020, CSUS and CCJBH built upon that work by initiating a second phase of the project (Phase II), gathering input on how to effectively advance the employment of individuals with LE in the criminal justice and behavioral health fields. As part of Phase II, an online survey was administered to CCJBH's listserv, which includes approximately 1,000 stakeholders representing diverse stakeholders across California (e.g., behavioral health and criminal justice system partners, advocates, other individuals interested in CCJBH's efforts). A total of 154 stakeholders responded to the online survey and, from these respondents, the CSUS team selected 10 individuals for targeted key informant interviews. Key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted by CSUS staff to identify key themes, current hiring practices, and identify effective strategies for hiring individuals with LE in the criminal justice and behavioral health fields.

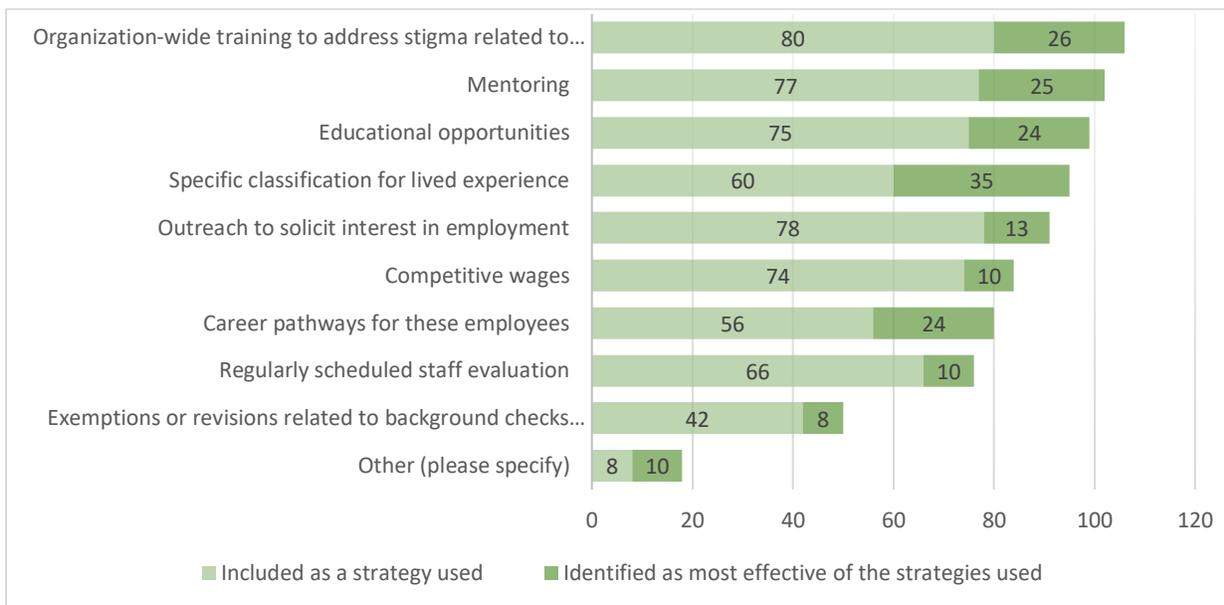
This memo provides an overview of key findings, to inform stakeholder discussions at the workshop *Solutions to Hiring Individuals with Lived Experience*, September 13, 2021. During the workshop, participants will build upon both the current practices and barriers identified, delving into how these barriers can be overcome through work targeting the individual, organizational, and community levels.

The findings represented below are summarized in greater detail in a forthcoming report, *Successful Approaches to Employing Individuals with Lived Experience in the Criminal Justice and Behavioral Health Fields*. This report will serve as a resource document and a basis for further CCJBH projects and potential system partner and stakeholder engagement activities.

KEY FINDINGS

Results from the online survey indicate that, out of nine possible strategies used to support employees with LE, stakeholders reported that stigma training, mentoring, and educational opportunities were the top three most commonly used practices, all of which were also rated highly in terms of effectiveness. Using a specific classification for LE was ranked fourth in terms of its use, but was identified as being most effective. Finally, while career pathways for employees with LE was seventh out of the nine strategies in terms of how often it was used, it was fourth in terms of effectiveness.

Figure 1. Number of Organizations Employing Each Strategy and Number of Organizations Indicating Each Strategy as Most Effective



KIIs resulted in the identification of current practices related to hiring, retention, and career pathways, as well as cultivating a workplace that values LE.

- Hiring Practices
 - Actively advocate and outreach in the community and with policy-makers to advance the interests of individuals with LE in the workplace.
 - Develop formal policies for hiring individuals with LE.
 - Include people with LE, and who otherwise reflect the diversity of the individuals served, on recruitment and hiring panels.
 - Recognize that, while LE is necessary, it is not sufficient. Applicants must have other core competencies and meet other requirements (e.g., provide support, empathy, advocate for clients, diverse cultural backgrounds, communication skills).
 - Align the provider's experience to the individuals and communities that they are serving.

- Remove barriers or appeal denials to employment based on background checks, rather than trying to remedy unequal treatment of people with LE by making LE a requirement.
- Continue to address stigma and educate individuals at all levels of the organization about the value and roles of people with LE. Educate the Human Resources staff on appropriate interview practices.
- Provide training and support to potential employers of individuals with LE to promote a positive experience throughout the hiring and employment process for both the employer and employee.
- Deliberately and strategically outreach, educate, and engage for early recruitment beginning in high school.
- Establish, when applicable, contractual obligations that require employment of people with LE.
- Retention Practices
 - Provide onboarding training to ensure that new hires are prepared for the work, as well as ongoing training that focuses on available opportunities to help staff gain the qualifications they need to succeed and advance in the organization. As appropriate, consider training opportunities related to other aspects of an individual’s life in addition to their work skills. To ensure that training is accessible to staff, training should be funded by the employing organization.
 - Demonstrate to staff that their work is valuable and supports the organization’s mission.
 - Provide benefits such as competitive living salaries, flexible schedules, paid time off, and health and behavioral health. Identify the benefits that are appropriate to the individual rather than following strict policies across the board (e.g., full time vs. part time work).
 - Provide ongoing support and mentorship in addition to “traditional” supervision.
 - Continue to address stigma related to LE and work to diversify management. Train supervisors and managers to ensure that they understand the peer role, and how to supervise and evaluate them.
 - Empower employees to take risks, grow, and provide opportunities to be part of organization’s decision-making process.
 - Provide promotional opportunities.
- Career Pathways Practices
 - Provide workforce and peer support training curriculum and opportunities to prepare individuals to enter the workplace. Create an onramp to employment by providing volunteer positions and training programs as means for recruitment to allow individuals to get the experience necessary to meet the qualifications of peer support roles that are not entry-level.
 - Remove systemic barriers to advancement, such as degree requirements for moving up within an organization.
 - Provide leadership programs and succession plan that are open to all staff.
- Cultivating a workplace that values LE

- Ensure that staff at all levels understand the value and roles of people with LE through training (especially for supervisors).
- Include LE perspectives in all decision-making.
- Encourage reciprocity partnerships that pair people to learn from each other, recognizing that individuals contribute in different ways to advance the mission of the organization.
- Employ people with LE at all levels of an organization, including leadership positions, and establish career advancement pathways.
- Empower individuals with LE to be part of advocacy for policymaking.

Although all organizations indicated that they are actively promoting the hiring of individuals with LE, they identified several challenges in the process.

- Background checks and security clearance: Several organizations identified background checks as an important barrier. In some contexts, these can be appealed, but even then, the additional time and resources the appeal takes become barriers in themselves. Hiring approvals and security clearances both present barriers in custody settings, though a lot of progress is being made in prisons to overcome these obstacles. Opportunities to address this challenge include legislative changes and relying on individual discretion to make the final call to hire someone despite results of background check. Several interviewees reiterated that it would be helpful to have a peer on the HR review committee that reviews the background checks to support evaluating candidates based on who they are now.
- Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) laws and disclosure issues: Some organizations do not explicitly identify LE as hiring criteria and part of the formal application process due to concerns about discrimination under EEO laws. In some cases, organizations do not make LE a formal requirement but instead ask how it will influence the work that the candidate will do. Other organizations do not ask directly about lived experience at all during the hiring process, allowing candidates to self-disclose if they choose to.
- Lack of Funding: One interviewee shared that funders of nonprofit organizations do not necessarily value peer support. Several interviews shared that they experience Medi-Cal reimbursement challenges. Staff with LE are often put into positions that are not peer-specific, like Mental Health Associates, because they are unable to bill for federal funds in the existing peer positions, making it difficult to create long-term positions. A different interviewee shared that they can bill for peer support.
- Adequate and fair compensation: One interviewee identified low wages due to county-set salaries as a barrier to recruiting qualified peer support.
- Stigma and lack of recognition of the role and value of peer support: Several interviewees identified implicit stigma against peers as ongoing challenge. Several interviewees added that, related to stigma, there are potential misconceptions regarding the role of peer support, which may lead to inappropriate hiring and support of staff with LE. These misconceptions can manifest as a paternalistic relationship between providers and peers, or treating peers as charity and tokenized job placements rather than valuing their contribution. An interviewee recounted how misunderstanding

and undervaluing the roles of individuals with LE can prevent them from contributing meaningfully to their teams, for example a peer may not have access to clients' electronic health records to be able to understand the client's needs more holistically, in the way other team members are able to.

- Lack of peer support specialist certification: Without a certification, core competencies, roles, and training needs remain undefined. One interviewee identified Senate Bill 803, Mental Health Services Peer Support Specialist Certification, as an important step to define these and support individuals with LE.
- Degree requirements for advancement within an organization: Discussed in the *Career Pathways Practices* section above.
- Insufficient support and mentorship: Discussed in the *Retention Practices* section above.

LOOKING FORWARD

Although respondents and interviewees shared the importance of employing people with LE, many organizations do not have a formalized policy for hiring individuals with LE. That said, there were key areas of agreement across stakeholders, such as:

- ✓ the importance of recovery for employing people with LE,
- ✓ the need to address stigma and demonstrate value at all levels of organizations and systems,
- ✓ the need for candidates to meet requirements and competencies beyond their LE,
- ✓ the importance of deliberate and strategic recruitment, ensuring that hiring panels and all levels of decision-making reflect the diversity of the individuals served, and
- ✓ the need to establish formal policies for hiring people with LE.

During the upcoming workshop, you will be invited to think together about strategies to overcome the challenges identified above. We would like to hear about how these strategies might be implemented at the individual, organizational, and community levels, by whom, and what resources are needed.