



# Understanding the Experience and Impact of Peer Advisors at Way2home

## 2018 Collaborative Research Partnership between Neami National and the University of Sydney

This document outlines key findings from a research study exploring the trial employment of three peer advisors in the Way2Home program – a program aiming to connect with people sleeping rough in inner Sydney and support their transitions into permanent tenancies. Rather than assume we understood the training and support needs of the peer advisors and the team, we decided to undertake research that could build understanding of this over time, while incrementally implementing learnings into practice along the way.

# The Research Process

1. An Action Research approach was initiated with research questions considered, including:

*What are the benefits and challenges?*

*What are the training and support needs?*

*How can practices be improved into the future?*

2. Discussions between the University of Sydney, Way2Home, & Neami Research and Evaluation, to set up the project.
3. Ethical approval gained through University of Sydney.
4. Data was gathered through focus groups, facilitated by Dr Tseris. Three focus groups conducted with the peer advisors only and three with all Way2home staff invited.
5. The focus groups were transcribed and data analysis occurred between focus groups. Dr Tseris provided feedback to participants at the following focus group and invited comments about the ongoing analysis.
6. Dissemination of the research at conferences and in journal articles.
7. Planning for the continuation of the study and ongoing research.

## A Collaborative and Participatory Research Approach

Providing space for peer advisors to voice their ideas, through peer advisor only focus groups.

Checking our findings as the research progressed – being willing to be wrong about our early assumptions and analysis and to make changes where needed.

Being open to surprising findings and following lines of inquiry that were not initially anticipated.

The research process aimed to provide relevant information to inform future practice.

## The Research Methods

The study used a focus group methodology to listen to the views of peer advisors and other staff employed by Way2Home. The choice to conduct 6 focus groups, conducted over a 6 month period allowed for:

- Multiple perspectives from diverse staff to be heard.
- A flexible approach, as not all staff were available at all times.
- Ideas and understandings could shift and evolve over time.
- Participants could provide feedback about their views on the analysis.
- The ongoing analysis could inform the next stages of the research.

## Key Findings

There are substantial benefits to employing peer advisors within homelessness outreach work. Peer advisors bring a wealth of skills and knowledge that may enable consumers to access a pathway out of homelessness that would otherwise not be available.

### **Peer advisors making a difference...**

*“There are things that they see that we don’t see”*

*“If you’re not experienced in living on the street, some things just don’t enter your head”*

*“Building a bridge for us with the consumer ... it’s just priceless.  
You can’t learn that in a text book”*

## Training and Support Needs of Peer Advisors and Teams

While one intention of the research was to make generalisable findings about the training and support needs of peer advisors, this was difficult because we came to understand needs as quite individual. Interesting results about the training and support needs of peer advisors involved in this study include:

- The need for understanding complex service systems (eg. referral pathways) and record-keeping processes in human service organisations.
- The need for confidence in managing office environments, and communication tools such as email and mobile phones.
- Training in risk assessment and crisis management may be less of a priority than imagined because such skills are integral to managing the experience of homelessness and peer advisors have considerable prior experience.

## Challenges

One of the most significant challenges expressed by the participants was how to define the role of peer advisors. This finding reflects research into the experiences of peer advisors located in other settings, for example, peer advisors in mental health settings. The peer advisors grew into their roles and as they gained confidence were able to take on a range of tasks and more clearly articulate their thoughts on the best ways to define the role.

While the study was focused on the experiences of peer advisors, the research highlighted a number of shared concerns and dilemmas that affect all Way2Home staff, not only peer advisors:

- Providing effective responses to clients across a broad range of circumstances;
- Maintaining hope in the context of limited resources;
- Balancing reflective processes with other priorities;
- The usefulness of induction and debriefing;
- The challenge of identifying the complex skills involved in homelessness outreach work;
- Role clarification issues (not only for peer advisors but for all Way2Home staff).

## Key Take-home Points

### Key issues for peer advisors, or people considering becoming peer advisors:

- Peer advisors bring significant skills and knowledge to homelessness outreach work: in particular, peer workers are vital in building a bridge between workers and consumers. Peer workers understand details about homelessness that other staff may not be able to grasp easily. Peer workers also bring a wealth of other skills, which extend beyond their lived experience of homelessness.
- Peer advisor work can be thoroughly rewarding: it can be a way to “give back”, and to support people who may not ordinarily trust services to access pathways out of homelessness.
- Although the peer advisor role involves sharing from lived experience, peer advisors can still make decisions about how much they share, to whom they share, when they share, and what aspects they choose not to share.
- The boundaries of the peer advisor role are not always easy to define, and other research studies have discussed this challenge as well. It can take time for peer advisors to work out what is and what is not part of their role. All staff need to take responsibility for discussing questions about how the peer advisor role should be defined and space is required to have these discussions in routine practice.
- In addition, the peer advisor role may change over time as the team identifies the potential for these roles and the peer advisors build confidence in the role. Ongoing communication between all staff is needed to enable role development over time.



### Ideas arising from the research for staff and managers on teams with peer advisors:

- Working with peer advisors can give you an opportunity to reflect on your own experiences, including power and privilege (your education, background, resources).
- At the same time, peer advisors bring substantial, often unharnessed knowledge and skills, so acknowledging their knowledge, skills and capability is also important.
- Take initiative in getting to know peer advisors, in order to develop trust and effective working relationships.
- Spend time prior to their commencement discussing and thinking about the roles of peer advisors in the organisation – Is everyone on the same page? What might we need to do to learn how to work alongside peer workers effectively? Continue these reflective conversations in collaboration with the peer advisors once they are employed.
- Let peer advisors know when their knowledge has made a difference in your practice.
- It is important to avoid making assumptions about the support that will be most helpful to peer advisors. At the same time, asking peer advisors immediately what their support needs are may not be the best approach, as it may take time for their role in the organisation to be clarified.
- As well as providing recognition for the work that peer workers do, consider organisational strategies to further support peer advisors – for example, access to ongoing employment, increased hours as the budget allows, opportunities to move to new roles in the organisation.

**Peer workers, managers and teams require time to learn how to make the most of the strengths that peer workers bring to the team.**

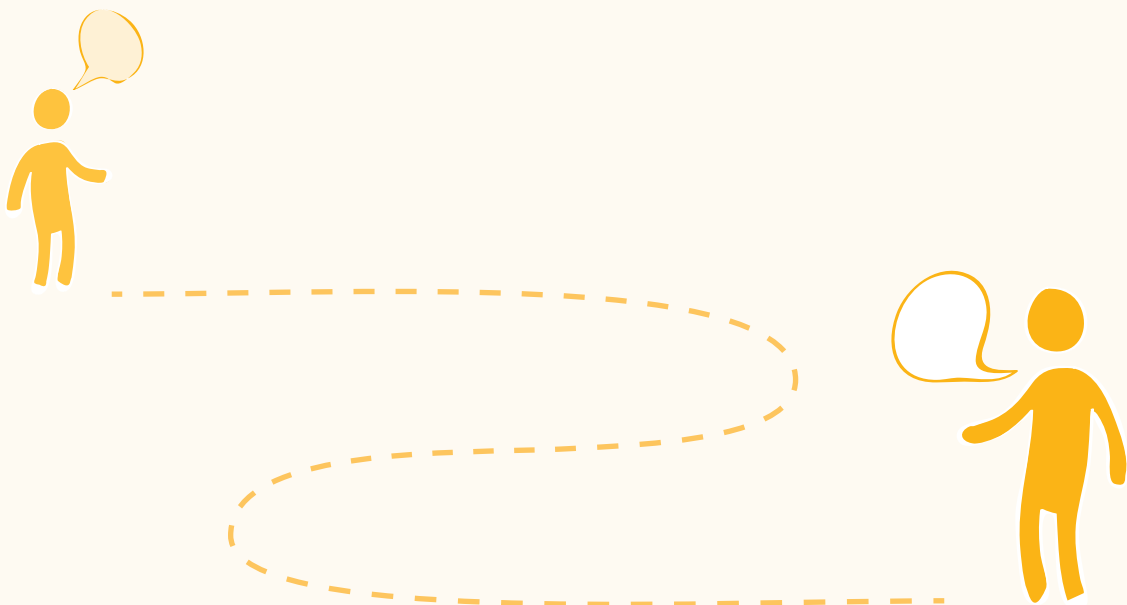
**This process requires attention and reflection.**

## Where to Next?

1. The researchers and peer advisors who participated in the research are co-presenting the findings at the Service User Academia Symposium in Melbourne, in November 2018.
2. We are preparing a journal article to share the findings of the study.
3. The peer advisors have been offered roles within Neami National beyond the initial 6-month period.
4. The research will continue in 2019. Key questions will be:
  - What is the impact of having peer advisors on homelessness and housing teams? Views of clients, peer advisors, staff.
  - As peer advisor roles become embedded in homeless and housing teams what do teams need to know about ongoing training and support needs for these new roles? How do these roles develop over time?

### *Putting social justice values into practice...*

*“The idea of collaboration and working alongside people and consumer involvement is so key to the idea of recovery. So it’s really nice that from the start of your engagement with people that’s not just a buzz word, but it’s practically showcasing collaboration with consumer involvement”*





We acknowledge Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities as the Traditional Custodians of the land we work on and pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging. We recognise that their sovereignty was never ceded and the impact of structural inequality that resulted from invasion continues to this day.

Neami is committed to cultivating inclusive environments for staff, consumers and carers. We celebrate, value and include people of all backgrounds, genders, sexualities, cultures, bodies and abilities. We believe our commitment to diversity and inclusion makes our teams, services and organisation stronger and more effective.

Neami National is a community mental health service providing rehabilitation and recovery support services in diverse communities across Australia. We work in a positive framework, supporting people to improve their health, live independently and pursue a life based on their strengths, values and goals.

### Our Vision

Full citizenship for all people living with a mental illness in Australian society

### Our Mission

Improving mental health and wellbeing in local communities

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