



## TOOLS YOU CAN USE

# People with Lived Experience as Leaders in Solutions to Homelessness

*By Carson Dean & Angie Welsh*

Organizations that are working toward better results for the populations they serve know that the best experts and leaders are not limited to those with educational qualifications or those with years of experience, public service, or political strength. Expertise, perspectives, and personal understanding of the issues are what people with lived experience (PWLE)<sup>1</sup> contribute as experts and leaders.

This guide has been developed to assist organizations seeking to include PWLE. The discussion that follows includes team preparation, recruitment, orientation, engagement, and compensation for PWLE within your organization. You will find some possible interview questions for PWLE, and an Implementation Prompts page. Every organization is different so all suggestions may not be relevant for everyone. This guide will get you thinking and get you started.

*"The only chance we have for truly ending homelessness lies in the expertise and leadership of those who have been impacted most by the experience of homelessness."*

The National Coalition for the Homeless

The experts at Carson Dean Consulting have curated the best information available related to engaging PWLE and combined with our years of direct services experience, have tailored this toolkit to assist organizations that have a desire to employ best practices in working with PWLE but have limited time and internal resources to develop an engagement strategy from scratch. Several excellent resources have influenced the development and content of this resource tool including Community Commons/100 Million Healthier Lives' *Engaging People with Lived Experience Toolkit*, and materials included in the *Lived Experience Training Academy* produced by the National Coalition for the Homeless. Building from a collection of insightful resources, this toolkit offers a simplified, practical framework that can be utilized to create an organization-specific plan for working with PWLE.

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<sup>1</sup> People with Lived Experience are referenced as PWLE throughout this document. PLEE (Persons with Lived Experience & Expertise) is also commonly used.



## Introduction

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A person with lived experience (PWLE) is someone who has first-hand knowledge of the issues related to housing instability and unsheltered homelessness, making them invaluable in community-level decision making. They will have:

- Expertise that doesn't come from training or formal education (although they may have either or both).
- Knowledge from experience with an issue or challenge.
- Direct experience with a system, process or issue, or trying to engage with a resource.
- Awareness of what works, what doesn't work, and what resources (formal or informal) are available in the community.<sup>2</sup>

This is why it is important to meaningfully and intentionally invite PWLE into the decision-making structure of your work at the system and program level. Their engagement should not be a strategy simply to fill a spot on a committee. When consulting the people who are the real experts, homelessness assistance becomes more relevant and responsive.<sup>3</sup>

These are some questions to ask yourselves before you begin:

- **Who is most affected by this issue?**  
To make real, effective change, we need to change the way that we do things. That means moving beyond surveys and consultation, bringing PWLE into the room, and working together.
- **Which voice is not heard?**  
Asking this question keeps us from assuming that we know everything we need to know and instead gives us a chance to learn about resources in the community, or potential partners in the work.
- **What do PWLE have, need, or are ready to grow into?**  
By asking about what people bring and how they're ready to grow, you can avoid tokenism and instead approach each other as whole, complex, changing beings.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Engaging Lived Experience Toolkit, Community Commons and 100 Million Healthier Lives;  
<https://www.communitycommons.org/collections/Engaging-Lived-Experience-Toolkit>

<sup>3</sup> Inclusion of PWLE and Expertise of Homelessness, HUD; <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/e-snaps/coc-supplemental-nofo-to-address-unsheltered-rural-homelessness/coc-program-special-nofo-digest-inclusion-of-people-with-lived-experience-and-expertise-of-homelessness/>

<sup>4</sup> Engaging Lived Experience Toolkit, Community Commons and 100 Million Healthier Lives;  
<https://www.communitycommons.org/collections/Engaging-Lived-Experience-Toolkit>



Preparing the group to integrate the person with lived experience as a team member will help ensure success for everyone. Consider your team's practices, systems, structures and what's needed for the individual to grow comfortable and learn to lead. Here are a few tips:

- Talk to a couple of people experiencing homelessness for an hour or so. Invite them to lunch to help you work through the tasks at hand. From the beginning, get the input you need. This one-time request before you begin will help you succeed.
- Value the time and expertise of people who have experienced homelessness. Be prepared to hear that your programs are not working the way you think.
- Identify someone who will be a point person who PWLE can go to for support throughout the project.
- The ideas and principles included here can be applied throughout your organization as a holistic approach for all leadership efforts in addition to efforts involving PWLE.

### **Check Your Unconscious Bias at the Door**

Don't worry. Everybody has some biases, and we need to be aware of them when we work with persons who are experiencing homelessness. Here are some common biases.

- People are to blame for being homeless
- Individuals are immoral, lazy, unstable, and lack effort, ability, thrift
- Persons tend to struggle with mental illness, substance abuse, and cleanliness
- Certain races, genders, sexualities are commonly homeless



## Recruitment

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PWLE bring a wealth of knowledge and insight to leadership spaces from multiple perspectives. From the start, it is important to recognize that many people who are currently experiencing homelessness or are recently housed may not be ready or interested in formal or highly structured activities like attending board meetings. Offer multiple ways to get involved and share expertise but give space for those who need to focus on what is best for them.<sup>5</sup>

### Sensitive Things to Consider while Working with PWLE

- Do not implement a stability “test”.
- Avoid “tokenism”.
- Be cautious of conversations that, while well intended, put PWLE in an uncomfortable spotlight – “How did you deal with \_\_\_ when you lived on the streets?”
- Trauma triggers may be known or not known – this applies to all people.
- Don’t over promise or make too many concessions in your recruitment of PWLE.

Here are some ways to get started:

- Review volunteer job descriptions for person-centered, inclusive, and accessible language and remove arbitrary educational requirements. Avoid having separate job descriptions for PWLE or using language like, “This section is not applicable to PWLE.”
- Post leadership opportunities in places where people experiencing homelessness spend time.
- Contact agency directors that provide services and ask for suggestions. Provide a simple printed invitation that includes contact information.
- Actively reach out to PWLE of homelessness to offer information sessions about leadership opportunities and create other pathways for PWLE to learn more about these opportunities. Consider offering a phone number and/or an email address for them to contact you directly.<sup>6</sup>
- Personally invite people to join the work — many people will wait for the invitation rather than ask you – just like most of the people on your committees and Board! Reach out to PWLE just like you reach out to everyone else, by phone, text, email, or better yet – in person.

Recruiting means more than just identifying who will join your team. After selecting someone to work with you, sit down and have a conversation with them about what they bring to the work, what they can do, and what they feel ready to learn. This may include:

- **Laying out your expectations and hopes:** Be clear about expectations; share hopes and goals. Ask about theirs.
- **Discussing support:** For any need you cannot meet, problem solve together to work around it. If we are not using an equity approach in the way we work, we cannot build programs that address equity. Common needs include, but are not limited to, internet access, transportation, job references, adapted meeting times, child-care, and cell phone minutes.

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<sup>5</sup> Meaningful Involvement of Persons with Lived Experience, HUD; <https://www.hudexchange.info/homelessness-assistance/coc-esg-virtual-binders/coc-governance/meaningful-involvement-of-persons-with-lived-experience/>

<sup>6</sup> Meaningful Involvement of Persons with Lived Experience, HUD <https://www.hudexchange.info/homelessness-assistance/coc-esg-virtual-binders/coc-governance/meaningful-involvement-of-persons-with-lived-experience/>



## Orientation

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Your team's success begins with orientation. Think about these things:

- Identify key elements for the role, including what will be done and how.
- Review the team's processes such as storing information, meeting schedule and location, expectations for pre- and post-meeting work, attendance, and responding to emails/texts, etc. (Verify that he or she can communicate electronically.)
- Allow them to see how the team's work might align with their own priorities and values.
- Discuss their personal resources, skills and capacity.
- Help them discover what their resource network is. They can share the experiences of others when appropriate.
- Stress that support is ongoing. Offer individual meetings for PWLE to go over other questions and use these for support and training as needed. Their identified point person (if needed, revisit the Team Preparation section above) can also be a source of support.
- Answer any questions about the role, project and work overall.

## Engagement

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Engagement work can be very short (a one-time commitment that lasts one or two hours) or very long (several months or years). It can also have many entry and exit points. Not all roles must have decision-making power. For example, a PWLE may be asked to be an advisor on a specific policy, but they may not have the final say in decisions made about that policy. They may be asked to sit on a board of directors but will not have the power to change the HUD definition of homelessness.<sup>7</sup>

Some specific engagement ideas include the following suggestions from the National Coalition for the Homeless.<sup>8</sup>

- Reviewing CoC or other funding applications
- Nominating a member or two to sit on the organization's Board of Directors
- Managing customer feedback channels - either with one organization or city/community-wide
- Creating and reviewing or commenting on shelter standards
- Hiring, mentoring or even overseeing Peer Support positions
- Providing public education such as participating in speakers' bureaus

Once the new team member with lived experience has been oriented and attended a meeting or two, discuss the role and how to make it best fit the individual. Expect to repeat this check-in process periodically.

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<sup>7</sup> PLEE and Data Decision Making, HUD; <https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/PLEE-and-Data-Decision-Making-CoC-Facing-Compensation.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Engaging with People who have been Homeless, National Coalition for the Homeless; <https://nationalhomeless.org/lived-experience/>



## PWLE Integration into the Team

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Check in periodically to see if the individual has what they need (resources, skills, information) to become a leader in the work. For example: would they prefer printed minutes and documents?

- Observe the person with lived experience during team meetings. Are they contributing their thoughts? Asking questions?
- Offer a variety of days/times and ways to participate (in-person, virtually, in writing, through social media) as appropriate.
- Support the PWLE in their work as a bridge to other community residents and leaders. Ask them what tools, strategies or support would be most helpful. Explain the value of writing down exactly what people say—or asking people to write their own thoughts, if they can.
- When a community member with lived experience shares their story in a room, they are choosing to be vulnerable, and model open sharing for others. However, a team member with lived experience has much more to offer than their experiences - they are another pair of eyes, a problem-solving mind, and more. Remember that and remind them as necessary.<sup>9</sup>

The way your meetings are planned, structured, and conducted can make a difference for everyone on the team, especially for those who have not served in a leadership position before.

- Set the tone for each meeting; review team's norms, or agreements about how the group will work together. If you don't have team behaviors, consider developing them, asking your new team member to help. For example: how you will handle conflict, what to do if someone goes over their allotted time on the agenda, etc.
- Build relationships within the team, understanding what each team member brings to your shared work. For example, start each meeting with grounding or icebreakers, or brief check-ins.
- Use strategies to help focus the team and set expectations for each meeting. For example: have agendas that list time per item, make goals for each meeting (make a decision, review options, etc.), document meetings (what was learned/accomplished in the meeting, tasks).
- Facilitate in ways that avoid groupthink and encourage a range of voices and perspectives. Work to balance people who are quick to respond and those who need to think a moment or need a direct invitation to contribute.
- Make the team meeting a safe place to learn. Model by asking a lot of open-ended questions. Always check for understanding before moving on. For example: use plain language, explaining jargon as needed. Define concepts and always give context.
- Get regular feedback from all team members by ending meetings with a discussion about what went well and what still needs work.
- Keep communication at the forefront of your work: share what you are working on and what you are learning to community members, organizations and other stakeholders early and often.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Engaging Lived Experience Toolkit, Community Commons and 100 Million Healthier Lives;  
<https://www.communitycommons.org/collections/Engaging-Lived-Experience-Toolkit>

<sup>10</sup> Engaging Lived Experience Toolkit, Community Commons and 100 Million Healthier Lives;  
<https://www.communitycommons.org/collections/Engaging-Lived-Experience-Toolkit>



## Compensation

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PWLE should be paid for their work. PWLE have often been expected to donate or volunteer their time while others around the table are, for the most part, paid through the organizations they are representing. Be clear and upfront about payment before the work begins. There should be discussions about when and how PWLE prefer to be paid. These conversations are especially important if some have concerns about how payments may have tax implications or affect one's eligibility for public benefits.<sup>11</sup> Payment methods can include compensation in several forms that will depend on the organization's policies and the PWLE's preferences/requirements.

- Cash
- Money order
- Checks
- Electronic fund transfers (direct deposit)
- Payment apps: Zelle, Cash App, PayPal, Venmo
- Prepaid cards

*“Engaging PWLE in community transformation is a challenging, joyful and deeply rewarding opportunity to change how we work, as well as our outcomes. It can feel intimidating, but so is anything that's really worthwhile. **Don't aim for perfection; just start somewhere.**”*

*100 Million Healthier Lives and the Institute for Healthcare Improvement.*

How much should you compensate PWLE? While there are numerous ways to approach determining appropriate compensation, a great resource is the *Out of Reach* report issued annually by the [National Low Income Housing Coalition](#).<sup>12</sup> They determine the hourly wage that a person would need to earn to afford levels of housing at fair market rent. This hourly wage, available by county, is a great benchmark to consider in developing a compensation strategy. Other ways to consider compensation – while using this benchmark – include childcare, education or transportation stipends. Overall, the concept is to value the expertise that PWLE offer by appropriately compensating them for their time and contributions.

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<sup>11</sup> Engaging with People who have been Homeless, National Coalition for the Homeless; <https://nationalhomeless.org/lived-experience/>

<sup>12</sup> National Low Income Housing Coalition; <https://nlihc.org/oor/state/nc>



## **Possible Interview Questions for PWLE – Individual Interviews, Focus Groups, etc.**

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Your goal is to respectfully get to know your experts. You can ask many of the same questions you ask all new participants in your work. Here are some specific questions to consider.

- Tell us how you would like to be included in our organization.
- How can we make you feel comfortable speaking up?
- What are some of the issues you have perspectives on?
- What would you like to learn more about?
- What are some of the best features of “Program X”?
- What are some areas for “Program X” to improve?
- If you could design the best program to support (vets, parents with children, etc.), what would it look like?
- Where in our community would you like to see more affordable housing?
- Overall, which organizations do good work in our community?
- What services are lacking?

## **Summary**

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Now that your organization has carefully considered what it takes to effectively engage Persons with Lived Experience, the next step is to decide if your organization is prepared to get started now or if more consideration, education, or information is needed. While the leader of the organization may decide to set the vision for engaging PWLE, this cannot ultimately be just a top-down mandate. Depending on the role that PWLE will play within your organization, discussion with the board of directors, management team and, perhaps, the entire staff may be in order. Don't let your enthusiasm, or worse, an arbitrary deadline or grant mandate, prompt your organization to start the process before it's actually ready. That said, the importance of utilizing PWLE is great enough that it shouldn't be put off indefinitely. Like all good strategic planning, determine what information is needed to make an informed decision, set a course for gathering and considering that information, and then convene the appropriate decision-makers and decide. Once your organization is ready to get started, consider starting with the implementation prompts at the end of this toolkit.

One final note. While this toolkit was designed specifically for engaging Persons with Lived Experience, its principles have a wider application. You can utilize many of the steps and considerations offered here for use in recruiting all people to serve on your board, committee, or workgroup. Being thoughtful about how to best engage your most valuable resource – people – is not optional. The success of your organization depends on it.



## Resources

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Here are two highly recommended models/approaches for engaging PWLE that have influenced the creation of this toolkit.

**The National Coalition for the Homeless:** The [Lived Experience Training Academy](#) (LETA) is a virtual (fully online) and inclusive professional development program initiated by the National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH).

**Community Commons, 100 Million Healthier Lives and the Institute for Healthcare Improvement.** The [Engaging Lived Experience Toolkit](#) was developed by the People with Lived Experience Workgroup and Community Champions from 100 Million Healthier Lives.

## Other Resources

Inclusion of PWLE and Expertise of Homelessness, HUD <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/e-snaps/coc-supplemental-nofo-to-address-unsheltered-rural-homelessness/coc-program-special-nofo-digest-inclusion-of-people-with-lived-experience-and-expertise-of-homelessness/>

Engaging with People Who Have Been Homeless, National Coalition for the Homeless <https://nationalhomeless.org/lived-experience/>

Meaningful Engagement of PWLE, Built for Zero  
[Built for Zero Definition-of-Meaningful-Engagement-of-PLH-Definition.pdf](#)

Meaningful Involvement of Persons with Lived Experience, HUD <https://www.hudexchange.info/homelessness-assistance/coc-esg-virtual-binders/coc-governance/meaningful-involvement-of-persons-with-lived-experience/>

National Low Income Housing Coalition, *Out of Reach* report (published annually) <https://nlihc.org/oor/state/nc>

PLEE and Data Decision Making, HUD <https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/PLEE-and-Data-Decision-Making-CoC-Facing-Compensation.pdf>

The Movement, Built for Zero  
<https://community.solutions/built-for-zero/the-movement/>



## Implementation Prompts

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Now that your organization is on board for engaging Persons with Lived Experience, here's a quick list of guided prompts to begin putting your plan into action.

- Decide on three things to prepare the team.
- Write down your team's recruitment plan and assign team members tasks and deadlines.
- Outline an orientation process and assign participants and roles.
- List at least two ways you could engage the new participant with lived experience.
- Consider one new strategy to strengthen the way your meetings are planned, structured, or conducted. Implement it.
- Decide how you will compensate your new team member(s).
- Decide how you will select from those who have been recruited and formalize your approach (much as you would a hiring process).
- Celebrate getting started!



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**Carson Dean Consulting** partners with nonprofit, faith community, and local government organizations to strengthen their capacity to address complex social challenges—particularly those related to housing and homelessness. With decades of leadership and direct service experience, our team specializes in pairing **strategic thinking with practical application** to help organizations achieve measurable, lasting impact.

Through initiatives like the **Homeless Solutions Network** and the **Tools You Can Use** series, we provide resources, training, and guidance that empower leaders to adopt best practices, elevate the voices of people with lived experience, and create effective, sustainable solutions.

This guide is one in a growing collection designed to give you practical tools and fresh perspectives to support your work. Stay connected with Carson Dean Consulting and the Homeless Solutions Network for more resources, conversations, and opportunities to collaborate.