

A Guide for Lived Experience Workers

INTRODUCTION



Who is this guide for?

You are reading this guide because you have been employed as a Lived Experience Worker within your organisation.

This guide is especially designed for people who are taking on a relatively junior role, or their first professional role in an Australian workplace. It is not suitable for someone in a senior or executive position.

Your role as a Lived Experience Worker is slightly different from that of other people in the organisation in the way it benefits the community, but also in the challenges it can create for you.

As you become involved in your new role there will be organisational structures supporting you. This guide will give you a quick introduction to some of the key aspects of being a Lived Experience Worker, organisational structure and support, and how to respond to challenges you may face because of your connection to communities.

i Definition

In the City of Yarra high-rise estates, a Lived Experience Worker is defined as a worker who:

- works and lives in the same community as the employing organisation (location, public housing).
- is required to work within their cultural community (culture and language).
- has self-identified as having a lived experience relevant to the role.

Context

This guide reflects the experience of Lived Experience Workers and managers at North Richmond Community Health (NRCH) and the Yarra Estate Housing team of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH). In recent years, both organisations have recruited and employed workers who live, or have lived, on a public housing estate in the City of Yarra and are representative of the cultural diversity of the estates.

Our experience of employing those 'Lived Experienced Workers' in entry level positions has led us to the development of two guides: one for the workers themselves, and one for their managers or supervisors.

The guides were developed through a consultation process, with:

- input from the Lived Experience/Cultural Workforce Advisory Group including representatives from North Richmond

Veronica works at a Community Health Service in a community engagement program. She migrated from South Sudan as a teenager, speaks Arabic and Dinka, and lives in one of the public housing high-rises in the same estate where her workplace is located. Like many other Lived Experienced Workers around Victoria, she was recruited during the Covid-19 epidemic to encourage local residents to follow public safety measures and to get vaccinated.

Veronica's role has since changed to a broader community support role, where she helps people with issues related to their housing, family relationships, children's health. She often acts as a cultural interpreter between families and local services. She sometimes accompanies residents to appointments. She is known to all on the estate and her knowledge and skills are highly valued by the South Sudanese families, who rely on her to help solve any issue they may have.



Community Health (NRCH) and the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) – Yarra.

- interviews with 20 Lived Experience Workers and 15 managers that have worked with Lived Experience Workers.
- a review of existing guides and reports on this topic.

The guides are a genuine reflection on the inputs received - with potential responses and actions grounded in experience. They are not definitive guides to all things Lived Experience Worker-related. Depending on the context, Lived Experience Workers can include peer workers in Alcohol and Other Drugs services, mental health workers, peer educators.

Our cohort is specifically those working in Housing and Community works - see definition below. Lived Experience Workers contribute to our workforce representing the diversity of the community that we serve.

Lived Experience Workers like yourself may share several of these social characteristics. For example, you may be from a culturally and linguistically diverse background, speak one or more languages other than English and live in a public housing estate. This adds to the complexity of the work and the risk of competing demands on your time.

Benefits of employing Lived Experience Workers

You have been chosen for this role because of your ability to be a 'bridge' between your organisation and the communities around us. This differentiates you from a worker who does not have experience of public housing or of the issues experienced by local residents.

Your experience of the community with whom you work creates some benefits for the community, you, and for the organisation.



They connect with people in a way that others can't. It's an asset.

(Manager)



BENEFITS FOR YOU

Workers in these positions recognise the benefits of these roles for themselves, particularly if they are new to the professional work environment in Australia. Some of the benefits of being employed in these positions may include:

- supporting others in the community to access services.
- learning more about working in an office environment.
- gaining new skills.
- learning more about Australian workplace norms.
- having opportunities to work and engage with diverse cultures.
- working in a community you grew up in.
- having opportunities to develop strong trusting relationships with communities you support.
- being in a position to suggest ideas to improve services for your community.



BENEFITS FOR THE COMMUNITY

Employing Lived Experience Workers can present many benefits for the community. For example:

- feeling relieved to be supported in their language.
- having workers that can empathise with their situation as they have lived experience of similar situations.
- better understanding services and processes so community members can help themselves.
- potentially improving health outcomes of community members.



BENEFITS FOR THE ORGANISATION

Managers and staff benefit from having Lived Experience Workers employed in their organisations because you provide important information for them to work better with communities. For example, Lived Experience Workers could help organisations to:

- be a more culturally safe workplace.
- learn from other cultures.
- have policies and protocols that connect well with the communities they serve.
- ensure that programs are co-designed to meet the needs of diverse communities.
- make information accessible to communities.
- get input from workers who understand the community.



Using our lived experience of being a public housing tenant, gives more understanding to the challenges that housing tenants face, we feel empowered to suggest system improvement, but also to work with community to explain reasons why things may take longer.

(Lived Experience Worker)



We get to gain lifelong skills, gain opportunities and broaden our network.

(Lived Experience Worker)



I have become more confident in the last 3 years of working in community.

(Lived Experience Worker)