

Employing peer support workers: Limits, fears, risks and responsibilities

Arrels Foundation, Barcelona

According to the experience of the Arrels foundation, one of the most important limits of hiring a peer worker is that the person who becomes a peer needs to be in a period of stability. The peer will work and will have contact with people in vulnerable situations similar to their own; this mirror effect can provoke empathy and the desire to carry out high-quality social accompaniment, based on a total understanding of the life experience. However, it can also affect emotionally the peer and open new wounds which haven't healed fully.

This is why it's of vital importance that the person is in a stable situation and can count on the trust and confidence of the rest of the team.

In this sense the team needs a period of adaptation that must serve to remove many of the doubts and, above all, to break down prejudices against the person who has lived on the street and who, with their experience, joins the team as a peer. Because, just as myths and prejudices towards the most vulnerable people exist in society, they are also to be found in social support team. That's why an open and questioning attitude needs to be maintained.

With regards to the incorporation of peers in the support teams of Arrels, doubts and prejudices have also appeared and can be resumed in the following recurring questions:

Will our clients be capable of exercising an educational and professional role in the personal lives of other homeless people who are living in a flat?

In what way will they be able to participate in the team meetings and carry out their role?

The answer is simple: we need to free ourselves of these prejudices and, to help do this, look at the experience of other organisations who have already incorporated peers onto their staff and have passed through this process.

Apart from these limits and fears, some risks also exist and need to be taken into account.

Two of the more important ones are highlighted here: in first place, the risk that the expectations that the peer sets in their social intervention with vulnerable people are not the same as the expectations of the client. In many cases the client may have other objectives and paths and the peer needs to be prepared to accept them, if not the horizontal relationship is jeopardised.

The second risk is related to drug dependency and leads us again to the importance of the person who works as a peer being in a moment of stability and maturity. Only in this way can a peer face situations

such as where a client looks for their collusion which could break their stability and even cause a relapse.

Another basic and definitive aspect to consider when incorporating peers is the definition of the role and responsibilities of each member of the support team, including the peer. These responsibilities should be the same for all the team members and be based on the personal tools that both the peer and the rest of the professionals have to carry out the social interventions.

In this way the peer needs to find the best way to add their life experience to the support team and, in the process, define their own style of intervention. Ongoing dialogue and work with colleagues is basic to help define the responsibilities of each member and their manners of intervention.

Challenges and new paths in the incorporation of peers – lessons learnt at Arrels

Arrels is making slow but steady progress toward incorporating peers in its support teams, but it hasn't started from zero. Since 2010 the organisation has been aware of the importance of the participation of the people we accompany as a tool to help promote their autonomy and self-esteem and to occupy their free-time in a healthy and useful way.

Helping out in the day centre, with the maintenance team, promoting leisure activities, collaborating with the administration department are some of the existing forms of participation. Furthermore, since 2015 two people who have experience of homelessness are included on the board of directors of the Arrels.

Despite this, the challenge is to elevate this participation to its highest level and overcome some of the prejudices which prevent clients being seen as capable of taking an active role in the organisation based on responsibility and task-sharing. If we talk about steps towards the integration of peers, perhaps we should take into account not only their presence but also the importance of an equal dynamic with the rest of the team.

Internally Arrels has set up a commission, formed by professionals and clients, to help make reality the incorporation of peers in the support teams. This commission understands that peers have a professional role to play and must be considered as any other worker, with the same rights and obligations as any other professional of the team.

The first steps of this commission have been centred on defining the professional role of the peer, highlighting the opportunities that can be gained with the incorporation of their life experience.

Externally, Arrels values the possibility of promoting the figure of peer not only within its own organization, but also with other organizations who are fighting against homelessness in Barcelona and with whom we work together in a coordinated manner.

The idea is to drive the figure of peer from organisations which accompany homeless people with training and work placements so that they can provide peers to other organisations. These work-focused organizations would establish a training plan alongside other associations, and the peers could enjoy work experience with various organisations

The hiring process of a peer for organizations that work with the homeless in Barcelona would be similar to the recruitment of any other worker, based on a selection process and the hiring of a person in an equal way to the rest of the team, with the role of the peer clearly defined.

We feel that this could be a good way to promote the adoption of peers in the organizations who are fighting homelessness, empowering those people who want to incorporate themselves as peers and, at the same time, breaking down prejudices.