

EXPERTISE THROUGH EXPERIENCE: PEER WORK IN VIENNA

In Vienna, formalised peer work within homelessness services has become a significant part of the city's strategy. In this article, neunerhaus offer insight into their Peer Campus, which offers certified peer work training, employment support, and serves as a think-tank for peer work development. The perspective of Burkhard Weissl, a peer at the campus, highlights the value of peer work for its impact on individuals with lived experiences of homelessness, and its potential to make societal systems more humane and responsive to people's needs.



By **Burkhard Weissl**, Peer Worker, neunerhaus Peer Campus
and **Paula Reid**, Health and Participation Lead, neunerhaus, Austria

While informal peer support between people experiencing homelessness has always existed, it was not until recently that peer work was formalised in homelessness services in Vienna. Through the effective collaboration and commitment of many different partners across the homelessness sector and beyond, it is now an established part of the city's strategy. This article will first outline the work of the neunerhaus Peer Campus and other stakeholders to embed peer work in homelessness support services in Vienna. In the second part of the article, a peer worker in the neunerhaus Peer Campus will give their perspective on the importance of this work and the potential of peers to transform the system.

THE NEUNERHAUS PEER CAMPUS

The neunerhaus Peer Campus is a hub for peer work organised and operated by neunerhaus, a social organisation based in Vienna. The Peer Campus is financed by the Vienna Social Fund (FSW) from the city of Vienna and works in close coordination with the FSW, homelessness organisations, and other stakeholders.

The neunerhaus Peer Campus works in three areas to support the development of peer work in Vienna. The first area is education and training; every year the Peer Campus offers a free certified peer work training course to people with experience of homelessness. Participants complete various study modules, undertake an internship in homelessness services, participate in study groups, and develop a final project. Once peers graduate, they can take part in further training for an in-depth focus on specific topics.

The second area of work is supporting peers while they look for work and once they enter employment. Peers are a new profession within homelessness services and bring a new professional expertise and competence into the system, through their direct experience of homelessness. To support the development of a professional identity, the Peer Campus offers peers working in different organisations opportunities to network, find mutual support and share experiences. The Peer Campus also offers support to organisations employing peers to ensure good structures are in place for the integration of peers into interdisciplinary teams.

The third element of the Peer Campus' work is a think-tank on the topic of peer work. This brings together theory and practice to raise the visibility and status of peer work in homelessness services. It also creates space for exchange with people interested in peer work nationally and internationally.

REFLECTIONS ON IMPLEMENTING PEER WORK IN HOMELESSNESS SERVICES IN VIENNA

Establishing peer work requires close collaboration and openness from funders, homelessness organisations, and other stakeholders to change the culture and structure of their work. There have been many examples of this in the development of peer work in Vienna. The curriculum for the training course, for example, was developed by a working group of homelessness organisations in consultation with people with direct experience of homelessness. Collaboration with public authorities is also important - recognition of the course by the Austrian public employment service means people can continue

to receive social security benefits during the course, and do not have to be available for work. Successfully embedding peer work in the system also requires partner organisations to offer internships during the training and paid roles for graduates. This is supported by the FSW, who have made peer work an explicit part of their strategy for homelessness organisations, and who provide initial funding to organisations creating new roles for peers.

Peers must also be involved in the entire process of systematically implementing peer work from the beginning. Their expertise can shape not only the organisations they are working within but the system as a whole. Embedding peer work in services is an ongoing process that requires constant reflection and adaptation, and the more peers are trained and employed, the more the structure and culture of homelessness services can be transformed.

A PEER'S PERSPECTIVE

Burkhard Weissl graduated from the peer certification course in 2020 and joined the neunerhaus Peer Campus team in 2021. Here he gives his insights into the role and importance of peer work in homelessness services:

“I am a peer. I love peer work. Even if I wasn't a peer I would be a fan of peer work, assuming I knew about it. Peer work can do a lot. Peers are people with valuable life experiences. Peers are there for people in need, with a lot of heart and commitment. Peers drive necessary changes and shake people and the system up.

“Embedding peer work in services is an ongoing process that requires constant reflection and adaptation, and the more peers are trained and employed, the more the structure and culture of homelessness services can be transformed.”

I would do it again! Become homeless? No, not ever! But give up my old identity in search of myself, yes. Suddenly I was standing there, having lost almost everything, but not my dignity. Little by little, I internalised what I would call the pride of the streets. This particular pride comes from the experiences that you do not have with a secure place to live. It refers to the daily struggle for survival, defying life day after day, wringing another day out without knowing how to go on. As a peer, it is possible to be proud of experiences which our society usually sees as reasons for shame.

I once had a secure job and stable housing. When I lost it, my life quickly fell apart. Today I have a secure job and stable housing again and after all the instability and uncertainty I have experienced, I never thought I could feel safe again. But now, without the expectations and pressures of my former life, and this new feeling of security, everything makes sense and I'm living the life I want to lead. For that I feel an enormous sense of joy and gratitude.

Peer work makes this security more attainable for people experiencing homelessness. Once someone has made it into the peer training, employment as a peer is already within reach. A professional peer identity develops. In my internship, I was able to try out my new role as a peer and experience being part of a team. For me, it was uplifting to be a colleague working alongside social workers, rather than someone needing their support. At the same time, I was deeply touched to accompany people experiencing homelessness in a professional role, to stand by their side and support them as a trusted person. This strengthened my self-confidence, which I sometimes had to struggle for in the team. With the peer certificate in hand, a dream can come true... Who doesn't want to be useful, to be seen as a valuable member of society? And even more so after the degrading experiences and stigma of homelessness.

The dream also means being able to say, 'I see and recognise you in your need. I am here for you.' For peers, the people they support are not simply people using a service, but people with a shared painful experience, even if the peer's own experience lies in the past. For now, the question is: how can I use the knowledge I have gained through my experience? Some peers answer this question by simply doing the work, others first ask themselves questions and think about what is needed for the further development of the peer role. Together as peers we work on the peer project. Diversity among peers is the best driver for development, because it challenges us to open ourselves up to other views and perspectives. This is true not only for teams in which peers are working but also for peers themselves. Peers need each other to grow, to reflect together, and to develop and maintain the peer identity in interdisciplinary teams.

This also involves dealing with many questions that surround peer work and that are often asked very directly: some are curious, open, encouraging; others are doubtful or even disparaging. There is media interest in peer work, and often the question is 'How do people who have experienced homelessness work as professionals?'. The answer: 'Just like everyone else'. Where peer work is already established, however, there is praise and recognition that peers' knowledge and experience is valuable. Peers know how to make a virtue out of necessity. That is not to be underestimated.



As peers, we want to do more than simply tackle prejudices and fight stigma! We can be more than 'just another professional group' in homelessness support services. It is also not just about having us involved. We want to set things in motion. Our difficult experiences drive us to change things for the better, in the system and in society. Making things better for people affected by poverty and exclusion means making them better for everyone. We must ensure that this is recognised on a societal level.

Every system has its own rules and ways of working. Life often goes against these. Systems require people to adapt to them, but this often does not work because people are individuals and not machines. Failure is human – in fact, failing within a system can mean success in being human, and vice versa.

Peerwork brings the daily reality of people experiencing marginalisation into the heart of the system. A contradiction on one hand, but at the same time an act of reconciliation, perhaps reparation. A great opportunity to make a system more human and bring it closer to people's needs. And this is something that is not just effective in the homelessness sector, but that can work in many other systems."

“Making things better for people affected by poverty and exclusion means making them better for everyone.”

