



Learning Sessions for Alliance's Annual
Conference
<https://www.allianceon.org/conference2024>



Workshop 11: Maximizing Lived and Living Expertise in Healthcare

Presenters:

• Jenny Stranges	Program Director	Quest CHC
• Niagara HELPS		Quest CHC

Description:

Niagara HELPS is a community partnership between Quest Community Health Centre, Niagara Health and McMaster University. This peer support program employs individuals with lived/living experience who provide support and system navigation for individuals experiencing homelessness who attend the Emergency Departments (ED) at Niagara Health (St. Catharines and Niagara Falls sites).

Session objectives and learning outcomes:

- The importance of leveraging lived/living expertise in healthcare
- Identifying partnerships that reduce reliance on Emergency Department services
- Shifting the focus from “What’s the matter with you?” to “What matters to you?”

Full description:

Niagara HELPS is a Peer support program that employs individuals with lived/living experience who provide support and system navigation for individuals experiencing homelessness who attend the Emergency Departments (ED) at Niagara Health (St. Catharines and Niagara Falls sites).

These supports include advocacy, goal setting and community resource referrals. Niagara HELPS peers support individuals who are identified by the hospital ER staff and are delivered within the emergency department as well as throughout the community. HELPS started as a research project called HEART(Health and Equity through Advocacy, Research, and Theatre) by McMaster university research where people with lived experience shared their experience in the ED through theater.

HELPS improves the health and wellbeing of clients by addressing the SDoH such as shelter, transportation and belonging. Having a 'liaison' with lived/living experience providing system navigation has shown to greatly improve the clients experience, especially since many people experiencing homelessness have expressed a lack of trust in healthcare. Having peers in the ED provides an opportunity to support and educate hospital staff in building connections and increasing sense of effectiveness.

The **preventative aim** of HELPS takes the burden off the ED by reducing resources treating individuals who are better managed elsewhere, creating better services at a reduced cost.

HELPS shifts focus from “what’s the matter with you?” to “what matters to you?” . Having peers with lived/living experience allow HELPS to work alongside clients to develop client generated goals.

The program leverages the expertise of the peers to enhance responsiveness and understanding of the clients needs alongside the larger interprofessional team.

HELPS works with ED staff to identify familiar faces and wrap support around them, while maximizing Coordinated Care Plans to ensure effective communication; in support of the needs of the client and prevent them from visiting the ED for issues that are better managed elsewhere.

HELPS has been working to share their method of practice through mentorship, presentations and publications. The HELPS peers have mentored other peer programs to share their learnings and experience. They have presented at conferences as well as through the Peer Support Symposium highlighting the value added by lived/living expertise. The Peers have also shared their expertise via webinars, presentations, media and peer-reviewed publications. research continues to analyze the value added of lived/living experience to the complement of care across the social service and health system.

The HELPS Community Partnership demonstrates the importance of involving those with lived/living experience in the health system. This not only impacts client care but improves the system as a whole. In fact, the HELPS program has inspired the development of additional peer programs within Niagara Health as well as provided training and ongoing mentorship.

Additionally, the annual symposium provides ongoing opportunities for shared learnings and inspiration across many service systems.

Lastly, the peers themselves report that participation in the program does not only have an effect on the clients but the peers themselves both personally and professionally.