
From Experience to Expertise:

Centering Lived & Living Experience in Inclusive and Equitable Community Practice



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Purpose

A practical guide to the meaningful engagement of lived and living experience.

This guide is an essential tool for ensuring that the voices, knowledge, and expertise of people directly affected by poverty are meaningfully recognized, valued, and integrated into decision-making processes. Too often, policies, programs, and services are designed without a deep understanding of the realities faced by those they are intended to serve, resulting in solutions that fail to address root causes or create meaningful change.

This guide is designed to support organizations in moving beyond archaic, colonial, tokenistic, and inequitable approaches to engagement by providing clear principles, language, practices, and expectations for respectful, equitable, and trauma-informed collaboration. It creates a shared understanding of how lived and living expertise should inform planning, governance, service design, evaluation, and systems change, while promoting fair compensation, accessibility, dignity, and shared power.

Structured as both a learning resource and practical toolkit, this guide helps organizations understand why inclusive engagement matters, when and how to implement it effectively, what appropriate resourcing should look like, and the barriers that often prevent meaningful participation. It is intended to support practitioners in navigating organizational, governmental, and funder-driven policies that may unintentionally exclude or marginalize lived and living experience voices. By challenging these systemic barriers and offering alternative approaches, the guide seeks to redirect policy and practice toward models that are rooted in equity, reciprocity, and the best interests of colleagues with lived and living experience.

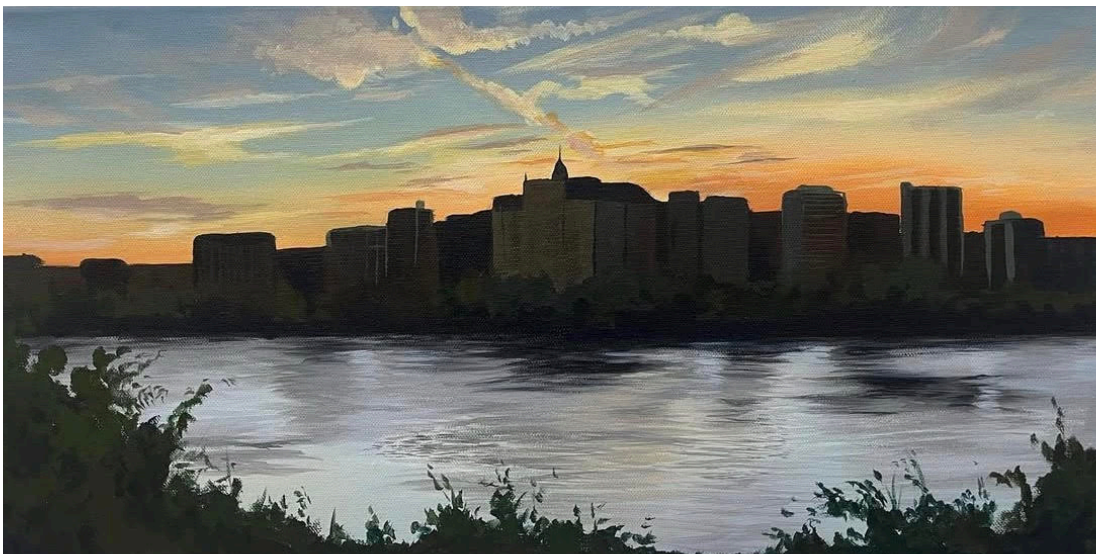


Photo of a painting provided by Peyton Cote, 2026.

Introduction

Effective public policy and resulting community development are rooted in more than research, data, and professional knowledge—they are strengthened when informed by the real-life experiences of the people most directly impacted

Across Canada, leading poverty-reduction, housing, health, and social policy frameworks consistently highlight that “inclusion of lived and living experience as expertise ensures that decisions are grounded in the realities of daily life, not just abstract analysis and the, oftentimes, biased interpretation of these realities.”

Lived and living experience offers context, expertise, and insight into systemic barriers, service gaps, stigma, and the unintended consequences of policies that are not identified through data alone and that are invisible to those outside the experience. When individuals share their first-hand perspectives, they are uniquely positioned to identify what works, what causes harm, and opportunities for change. This knowledge is critical for designing policies, programs, and systems that are responsive, equitable, and sustainable.

Lived and living experience must be recognized as a form of expertise, not reduced to an anecdote or framed as a voluntary contribution. This shifts traditional power dynamics. It validates community voices, builds trust, and fosters collaboration, ensuring that solutions are not only designed for communities but developed with them. In this way, valuing lived and living experience is not just an ethical responsibility—it is a practical necessity for creating meaningful, inclusive, and effective change. Working with, not for, people experiencing inequities enables organizations and governments to co-create policies and community systems rooted in lived realities and capable of producing anti-oppressive, sustainable outcomes.

In short, valuing lived and living experience enhances the legitimacy, effectiveness, and humanity of community-driven work. It ensures that efforts to reduce poverty are informed by those who understand its realities most deeply and are committed to shaping a more just society.

“Working with the Saskatoon Poverty Reduction Partnership on this project, I appreciated receiving monthly payments instead of honoraria. The consistency allowed me to budget, plan ahead, and participate more meaningfully. It felt like my lived expertise was being recognized as valuable, ongoing work rather than a one-time contribution.”



History of Inclusion with the SPRP

The Saskatoon Poverty Reduction Partnership (SPRP) has adopted the ‘Nothing About Us Without Us’ premise since its inception in 2009.



Creating a Culture of Inclusion

A practical guide for community groups & employers to include people with the lived experience of poverty in their work.

“Nothing About Us, Without Us.”

“Nothing About Us, Without Us” is a principle rooted in social justice movements, particularly disability rights, and has since become a guiding value across many areas of policy and community work. At its core, it means that decisions, policies, and initiatives that affect a community must not be made without the active involvement of people from that community. It is both a call for inclusion and a safeguard against top-down approaches that often overlook or misunderstand lived realities. By centering the voices of those directly impacted, this principle ensures that solutions are relevant, respectful, and effective, while also redistributing power to those who have historically been excluded from decision-making tables.

Working with a diverse team of folks with lived and living experience of poverty, the SPRP is committed to ensuring that decision-making, priority-setting, and outputs are informed and validated by folks who are most impacted by the outcomes.

In 2017, the Tamarack Institute recognized the SPRP commitments and the first version of the SPRP **“Creating a Culture of Inclusion - A practical guide to community groups and employers to include people with lived experience of poverty in their work”** with a Cities Reducing Poverty Award: the “Engaging people with lived experience Award.” This recognition created a wave across the poverty-reduction sector in Canada. SPRP situated itself as a leader and a disruptor, challenging funders, government, and community practitioners to rethink the way they used the expertise of people facing inequity.

Over time, and as the SPRP emerged from the COVID-era, it became apparent that a re-visit of this preliminary document and practice was needed. The previous work had created opportunities and changed landscapes, but it wasn’t done and the practice was still facing up-hill battles, particularly with government, funders, and academia.

SETTING THE STAGE

DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS

The SPRP puts forward a set of core ideas that support this work, challenge harmful myths, and push back against rules and practices that exclude people facing inequity. **These ideas matter right now.** They help strengthen our commitment to people with lived and living experience, recognize **their knowledge as valid**, and question the systems that organizations, governments, researchers, and funders use to decide whose voices are heard and valued.

What do we mean when we say POVERTY?

*The SPRP defines poverty as a **multidimensional situation in which individuals or communities lack the material, social, emotional, cultural, and political resources required to live with dignity, exercise meaningful choice, and fully participate in society.***

In other words, poverty means not having enough resources, power, or stability to meet basic needs, make real choices, or live with dignity. This is often because of systems and conditions beyond individual control.

Poverty is a dynamic and systemic condition arising from the interaction of economic deprivation, social exclusion, and structural barriers that limit people's ability to secure basic needs, maintain well-being, and influence the conditions affecting their lives.

Poverty exists along a continuum of severity and persistence, shaping people's ability to meet basic needs, maintain well-being, exercise agency, and influence the social, economic, and political conditions affecting their lives across generations.



In the Canadian context, poverty experienced by First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples is a multidimensional and intergenerational reality rooted in historical and ongoing colonization. It arises from the forced dispossession of land, suppression of governance systems, disruption of cultures and economies, and the denial of self-determination, resulting in persistent economic deprivation, social exclusion, structural inequities, and barriers to intergenerational wealth transfer. Poverty exists along a continuum of depth and duration, constraining the ability of Indigenous peoples and communities to meet basic needs, sustain holistic well-being, exercise agency, and fully realize their inherent rights.



Immigrant poverty in Canada must also be understood within a historical colonial landscape that was explicitly designed to privilege whiteness and European settlement. From the outset, immigration, land ownership, labour markets, and citizenship were structured to favour white, European populations while excluding or marginalizing racialized newcomers through restrictive policies, racial hierarchies, and unequal access to opportunity. These foundations continue to shape present-day systems, resulting in disproportionate poverty among many immigrant and refugee communities through barriers such as credential devaluation, labour market segmentation, racial discrimination, limited access to intergenerational wealth, and precarious legal or economic status. As a result, immigrant poverty is not merely a function of individual circumstance, but a systemic outcome of colonial and racialized structures that determine who is permitted to belong, prosper, and pass on security across generations.

For some, wealth is inherited as a foundation. For others, the absence of it is inherited as a barrier. Intergenerational wealth transfer is one of the most powerful forces shaping inequality—determining not just who has wealth, but who has opportunity.

Money In < Money Out

Poverty IS about Income disparity

At its most basic level, poverty is a math problem.

When the money coming into a household is consistently less than the money going out to meet basic needs—like housing, food, transportation, and childcare—people are forced into impossible choices. No amount of budgeting skill can close a gap that is structurally built in. Ending poverty means changing that equation so that money in is greater than money out, not just occasionally, but reliably and over time.

This shift doesn't happen by chance—it requires deliberate action across systems. Wages must reflect the real cost of living, income supports must be adequate and accessible, and essential costs like housing and food must be stabilized. When we align these factors, we create conditions where people can get ahead instead of falling behind. Poverty is not inevitable; it is the predictable result of an imbalanced equation—and it can be solved by rebalancing it.

Even when people have enough income, it only improves their lives if the goods and services they need are actually available, accessible, and affordable. **Money alone doesn't solve poverty if there's no housing to rent, no childcare spaces, limited transit, or long waitlists for health and community services.** In those cases, people are still stuck—just with cash in hand but nowhere to spend it in ways that meet their needs.

That's why ending poverty requires both sides of the equation to work together. We need to ensure people have enough income and that communities have the infrastructure, services, and supply to meet demand. When income supports, fair wages, and strong local systems are aligned, people can not only make ends meet—they can participate fully in their communities and build stability over time.



ENDING WORKING POVERTY REQUIRES A MAP

Where your money comes from, where it goes, how you create balance and how you build for a poverty-free future.

MONEY IN

This includes all money that comes in to fill your treasure chest. Employment income, benefits and tax incentives, inheritance, gifts, lottery, side gigs, government supports.

ALL income is counted.



MONEY OUT - FIXED

This includes all expenses that you cannot skip and/or that you have no flexibility in the cost, and includes things like taxes and interest. This can also include sudden/emergency costs like a ticket or broken essential item.



MONEY OUT - VARIABLE

This includes all expenses that you have some control over. It includes a basket of goods used to describe the poverty line (market basket measure, MBM) like: food, housing, utilities, transportation, technology, clothes, entertainment, investments, education, debt payments. Many of these things are essential, but unlike Fixed Costs above, there is some degree of how much money you can spend on each item, some option to sacrifice one thing for another, and as your wealth increases, these options/choice become more flexible. The MBM can be used as the poverty line, but the Living Wage is viewed as the thriving line, the point at which the cycle of poverty can be broken.



BALANCING ACT

Managing the money IN and money OUT is always a balancing act. To live above the poverty line, your money in MUST be more than your money out. As your wealth changes, so does the balancing act. As wealth increases, so do choices. As part of the balancing act public policy must ensure that low income earners are not caught in a cycle of poverty that they cannot get out of.



BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

Families should be encouraged to build assets. These assets can be money (loans/debt load, investments) or things (car or house) and even things like education, training and expertise. Asset building create opportunities for intergenerational wealth transfer and improves options for savings for uncertain times. Assets are a families' safety net. They support vibrant thriving families that live above the poverty line



CHOICES and OPTIONS

Everyone's situation is different. We all have our own circumstances, priorities, and expectations, which means balancing money in (income) and money out (expenses) looks different for each person. It's not simple for anyone—and for people living on low incomes, the margin for error is often very small. We also all carry our own beliefs about what money should or shouldn't be spent on. When we apply those beliefs to someone else's situation, it can lead to blame and judgment—especially toward people who already face the toughest financial realities. **This is where harmful assumptions take hold, like saying “they should just make better choices.” In reality, those choices are often made within tight constraints, where there are no easy or ideal options.**

CHOICE:

The act of selecting or making a decision when faced with two or more possibilities (options)

OPTION:

The thing(s) that are or may be chosen.

People go about their daily lives managing this balancing act. What we often overlook is that the options available aren't always good ones. When every option comes with real trade-offs—like choosing between rent and food, or work and childcare—choice stops feeling like a real choice at all.

In these situations, people aren't failing to decide; they're navigating systems that don't offer viable options.



Think about it this way...



You're at a buffet with lots of options. If you have no dietary restrictions, you can choose whatever you want. If you have some restrictions, the options are still there—but your actual choices are fewer. And if your restrictions limit access to most or all of the food, you're left with two options: eat nothing, or eat something that could harm you or go against your health, culture, beliefs, or needs. Neither of those are good choices. So even though the options look the same as everyone else's, real choice disappears. In that situation, people usually pick the option that does the least harm. This is where blaming and shaming show up. As practitioners, we often hear that people are making “bad choices” or that they've been given what they need but still aren't thriving. What we don't always stop to consider is the quality of the options available—and how those limited, often harmful options shape what's possible.

“So often, policy is designed by people who believe everyone is the same. But when you're living in poverty, your choices are often limited to options that don't meet your needs or may even cause harm. If every option comes with a negative consequence, is it really a choice?”

Why are these 2 concepts critical to this conversation? Historically, people with lived and living experience have been victimized and stigmatized by values-based thinking about choice and options. Frequently they're "paid for their expertise" with food, gift cards, or other non-monetary items. Funders often scrutinize honouraria, and these non-monetary gifts, creating a cycle for practitioners to justify the investment in the expertise.

This framework is going to challenge you to eliminate non-monetary items as options to pay colleagues with lived and living experience because **eliminating poverty is about equitable access to income (money) AND creating space where people are actively choosing what they need to thrive.**

METHODOLOGY

How this content was created

The SPRP Coordinator created a small Lived and Living Experience Advisory Committee that worked to develop the methodology, implementation, content, and supports for all the community members involved in building this document.

The Advisory Committee members were hired on contract to provide this expertise.

This team worked through existing best practices of the SPRP (historical documents), and other Lived & Living experience inclusion guides in Canada.



The team also created a consultation process where the content and recommendations of this document were shared with 35 community members who self-identified as having lived and living experience of poverty.

The data collected from these meetings was embedded throughout the document and reinforced the recommendations.

All participants were fairly compensated with cash payments and provided other supports during the events/meetings. The entire process took approximately 150 hours over the course of 9 months.

Defining LIVED, LIVING & LEARNED EXPERIENCE

Engaging with colleagues who bring lived or living experience requires valuing the personal knowledge, understanding, and insights that come from directly experiencing a particular condition, situation, or set of circumstances—rather than relying solely on theory, research, or observation.

Unlike abstract expertise, lived and living experience emphasizes the realities of daily life, the emotional and social impacts, and the nuanced ways systems and structures affect individuals. These perspectives are particularly important when addressing social issues such as poverty, mental health challenges, disability, systemic inequities, or trauma.

Lived Experience

Refers to the knowledge, perspective, and insights gained from having already gone through those experiences. It is often recognized in research, policy, and advocacy as valuable expertise distinct from secondhand or professional knowledge. For example: “They bring lived experience of homelessness and of previous experiences of poverty to the advisory committee.”



“Including my voice is like planting a seed—I hope it will grow into something and make a difference.”

Living Experience

Refers to the ongoing, day-to-day act of experiencing something as it is happening. For example: “She is currently living below the poverty line; they are living on income assistance; he is living rough or is underhoused right now.” It emphasizes being in the middle of it.

Why definitions and words matter:

Language shapes our perception and attitudes which impact power and inclusion. Using people-first, respectful language (such as “people with lived/living experience of poverty”, “people with lived expertise”) avoids stigmatizing labels (such as, “the poor”, “the homeless”, “the needy”) and causing harm.

What about “Learned Experience”

Learned experience refers to knowledge, skills, and understanding gained through formal education, training, professional practice, or structured study. It is shaped by curricula, credentials, evidence-based frameworks, and institutional norms, and is often recognized and validated through degrees, certifications, titles, or years of professional practice.

While learning can increase an individual’s capacity, empathy, and conceptual understanding, it does not, and can never, replace the knowledge generated through lived and living experience. Lived and living experience is not theoretical or transferable through study; it is embodied, contextual, and formed through direct navigation of systems, trauma, and realities that cannot be replicated through professional or academic learning alone.



Setting boundaries between these definitions can be complex. Questions arise such as: How much time must pass before an experience is considered “lived” rather than “living”? Do certain experiences last longer than others? Should colleagues self-identify their experiences, or do systems and organizations risk imposing definitions and limitations that may not fit?

For the purposes of this work, we will use the definitions above as guiding boundaries, while recognizing that individual circumstances may challenge or expand these generalizations. In terms of resourcing and valuing lived experience, the framework emphasizes the inclusion of both groups: those who currently self-identify as “living in poverty” and those who self-identify as “having previous experience but not currently living in poverty.”

Both perspectives are critical to inform all aspects of the work. It is important to note, however, that when discussing supports and resources, individuals with current living experience often require tailored services and accommodations. These are essential to ensure active choice in participation, while not inadvertently causing further harm or exacerbating existing challenges.

Examples:

In the next section, we asked people with lived and living experience how they would explain examples of expertise that could be used to discuss the 12 Bold Ideas to Eliminate Poverty Framework. It’s important to note that folks may have experiences in one area or across a combination of many areas.

“People think I can’t budget or take care of my needs—they are wrong.”

Types of Lived and Living Experience within the 12 Bold Ideas to Eliminate Poverty Framework.



- 1 Income and Assets
- 2 Meaningful Employment
- 3 Transportation
- 4 Child Care
- 5 Education
- 6 Health

- 7 Access to Good Food
- 8 Housing
- 9 System Navigation
- 10 Washrooms
- 11 Justice (system connections)
- 12 Other Experiences

For the purposes of this document we have included “meaningful employment” which includes social enterprise models

Bold Idea	Lived Experience	Living Experience
Income and Assets	- Grew up in poverty but currently not - No intergenerational wealth transfer - No material assets to support as a safety net	- Currently living below the poverty line, on Income Assistance or Disability - Currently working but unable to make ends meet - Equity-seeking demographic that is purposefully excluded from the economy
Meaningful Employment	- Worked precarious employment (PT, minimum wage) - experience being underemployed based on credentials - uses “gig” opportunities to offset income pressures	- Working FT/FY at minimum wage—precarious employment - Under employed and/or unable to access employment in their trained field
Transportation	- Previously relied on transit, ride sharing, or other community based transportation systems to get to work, events, school - Unable to previously afford or access discounted transit supports	- In active transportation poverty - Unable to access discounted transit supports - Frequently misses work, school, appointments due to lack of transportation options
Child Care	- Parents that have had previous experience with child care expenses - Advocates from the child care system	- People with children currently in child care - Child Care providers (home and system)
Education	- Previous experience with K12 and poverty - Advocates and representatives from the K12 system	- Currently IN the system (K12 to postsecondary) - Parenting/supporting people in the K12 system - Currently unable to access the K12 system due to financial barriers

Bold Idea	Lived Experience	Living Experience
Health	- Previously experienced barriers to accessing healthcare services - In recovery from substance use	- People are currently experiencing barriers to accessing healthcare services - Currently using substances (noting harm reduction and trauma informed care)
Access to Good Food	- Previously accessed emergency food services such as food bank, soup kitchens - Parents as part of a school food program - Participants in food-related programming (community kitchens/gardens)	- Currently using the food bank - Rough sleeping/homelessness - Parents as part of a school food program
Housing	- Was precariously housed or unhoused in the past - Reintegrated from justice - Historical connection to release from systems	- Is currently precariously housed or unhoused - Currently homeless, connected to an emergency shelter - Recently released from a system partner with no housing plan
System Navigation	- Historical connection to systems - Supporting other folks navigating the historical experience they had	- Currently navigating a system - Income assistance clients - People with chronic illness - People who have recently been evicted
Washrooms	Previous experiences with lack of washroom infrastructure	- Has no access to washrooms outside of the system access points - Trans community pressures for washroom access
Justice	- Experience in the foster care system - Experience with apprehension and child/family - Previously incarcerated - Previous experience with police	- Currently navigating with children in the foster care system - Ongoing experiences with police - Recent reintegration from justice - Equity-seeking individuals who face systemic oppression
Other Experiences	- Childhood trauma including residential schools, MMIWG, gender-based violence, intimate partner violence, lateral violence - Caregivers who have provided care to an individual living with a disability	- People living with a disability - Caregivers currently providing care to an individual living with a disability - Families with missing loved ones - Equity-seeking individuals with ongoing systemic oppression

Learned Experience is not included in this chart but refers to knowledge gained through education, training, research, and learning directly from people with lived and living experience. It represents understanding that is acquired rather than personally experienced.

Equity-seeking demographics often have lived or living experience across these sectors due to racism, discrimination, poor public policy, exclusionary practices, and a wide range of oppressive societal tactics.

When considering diversity for the representatives from the lived and living experiences, it is important to consider how equity-seeking demographics are often disproportionately excluded from decision making and implementation processes. Consider the demographic representation from across ethnicity, culture, linguistic background, gender identity, religious and spiritual backgrounds, sexual orientation, age or life stage, geographic location, ability/disability, family/caregiving status, etc.



When including folks with lived and living experiences across this spectrum of work, it is critical to create safe spaces that are rooted in harm-reduction principles, while using trauma-informed culturally relevant supports.

The following sections outline the SPRP's commitments to a practical, ethical, and equity-based inclusion framework across policy and practice. It is important to pause here to clarify that this document is not intended to define, guide, or substitute for inclusive or collaborative practices involving Indigenous Elders, Knowledge Keepers, or decolonial Indigenous worldviews. While individuals with lived, living, and learned experience may be Indigenous, the authentic inclusion and weaving of Indigenous worldviews—through Elders and Knowledge Keepers—requires adherence to locally specific, regional, and jurisdictional protocols.



Photo with permission: Elder Judy Pelly

Protocols, funding structures, and support for Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers must be co-designed with those Elders and Knowledge Keepers themselves. Establishing ethical, relationship-based practice requires working directly with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit community members and leadership, and understanding the relevant treaties, land-based relationships, and jurisdictional policies.

This document is not intended to direct, challenge, or interfere with those established protocols and practices, but rather to respect their authority and autonomy.

Policy and Practice for equity-based inclusion

Key Principles of Centering the Voices of Lived and Living Experience.

- Equity as a foundation
- Ensure diversity of participation
- Remove financial barriers
- Remove participatory barriers
- Create clear roles and pathways for influence
- Avoid tokenism
- Slow the process where needed
- Recognize and highlight contributions
- Build capacity and mentorship
- Ensure involvement from design through evaluation



"I was added to a research team and had the opportunity to travel to a conference—I was only paid for my expenses not for my expertise or time—even though everyone else was paid wages and expenses."

"Speed bumps along the way are fine but there cannot be gates."

Policy and Practice for equity-based inclusion

Key Processes of Centering the Voices of Lived and Living Experience.

Through ongoing practice, consultation with community members, lived and living experience colleagues, agency partners and review of pan-Canadian practices, the following is an outline designed to provide a comprehensive overview of how to implement the key principles outlined above.



Building Relationships

Do the groundwork

Learn about the history, context, and lived experiences of the individuals or communities you are engaging with. Understand local protocols, cultural norms, and historical impacts (e.g., colonization, systemic exclusion).

Be intentional and transparent

Clearly communicate the purpose, goals, roles, and expectations of the relationship. Avoid vague promises—clarity builds trust.

Center voices of those most impacted

Ensure that people with lived and living experience are not just consulted, but actively involved in shaping decisions. Follow the principle of “Nothing about us, without us.”

Practice humility and active listening

Approach relationships with openness and curiosity. Listen more than you speak, and prioritize understanding over proving expertise or pushing agendas.

Respect protocols and knowledge systems

When working with Indigenous Elders, Knowledge Keepers, or culturally specific groups, adhere to community-established protocols and seek guidance on appropriate engagement.
(see comments on page 15)

Invest time and consistency

Authentic relationships take time to build and require ongoing contact. Avoid one-off interactions; demonstrate reliability and trustworthiness. Build a network and encourage colleagues with lived and living experience to invite their network.

Honor contributions and practice reciprocity

Acknowledge and credit the ideas, knowledge, and time of participants. Create opportunities for mutual benefit, skill-building, and meaningful impact.



Financial Compensation

Create clear policies for the types of financial compensation

Build written financial compensation policies for the types of inclusion that are supported. Be clear and consistent with the implementation of these policies. In general they should include the following:

- Rates of pay – at or above the current local living wage
- Hours of work – time of the meeting, extra pre/post meeting, etc.
- Payment process – preferably on day of consultations, but could be negotiated as contract for service, monthly stipend, or other payment process depending on the type of event/inclusion.
- Cash – at the event or eTransfer if appropriate. Reasonably sized bills, no coins, no cheques.

Avoid tokenism with compensation

- Avoid compensation with gift cards or other non-monetary goods
- Should a colleague request non-cash compensation, a co-developed strategy must be developed.

Be cautious of financial policies within systems that create barriers

- Requesting SINs or other identification may create barriers.
- Internal agency policies are not the responsibility of the lived/living experience colleague. Create opportunities to alleviate these barriers with innovative local solutions.
- Avoid imposing your own value system and bias on colleagues with lived and living experience.

Participants in the community consultations were very clear when we were talking about compensation and how systems/agencies/researchers pay them. They all said:

“The inclusion of Lived/Living Experience should NOT be impacted by internal system policies—EVER.”

3 Other Support Processes

The meeting spaces

Co-create meeting plans that emphasize barrier-free access for participation. Consider things like: time of day, location of meeting room (i.e. requires transportation, is located in a building that triggers participants like bars, restaurants, schools, churches, etc.), and accessibility. If the meetings are online, consider technology access, wifi, computers, and literacy capacity.

Non-financial supports:

Colleagues with lived and living experience often require individualized support considerations. These are best co-developed through conversation about barriers and needs.

Consider some of the following:

1. Child Care
2. Access to Food
3. Transportation support
4. Elder/dependant care
5. Pet Care
6. School-aged children
7. Harm-reduction supports
8. Access to technology
9. Intergenerational trauma
10. Mental health and wellness supports
11. Printed materials



Trauma-informed considerations:

The physical, environmental, and psychological safety of participants is critical. Consider the following when co-creating process and policies:

1. Co-facilitation with colleagues with lived/living experience
2. Comfortable seating in familiar surroundings
3. Noise and hearing related supports
4. Visuals and language
5. Breaks and areas to decompress or self-reflect
6. Stick to the agenda and be consistent
7. Provide warning and advanced notice if topics are sensitive
8. Create multiple options for participation (speaking, writing, art, etc.)

Always have snacks and water

Never assume people have access to these things. It's best to provide them to everyone to avoid tokenism and creating optics that single out folks in need.

Follow up with participants

Meetings and events can be overwhelming; build in support to debrief after events.

Be aware of mistakes, rectify them, apologize, learn/unlearn/relearn.

Know that you won't always get it right. That's ok; be compassionate, respectful, and apologize. Avoid making the same mistakes over and over.

4

Harm-Reduction—Working with Folks Using Drugs

Creating a space that is safe for all participants is essential.

This becomes increasingly more difficult when diversity and equity-based processes are implemented effectively because of the tremendous continuum of diversity in the space. The SPRP does not have specific guidelines for the inclusion of folks with lived/living experience of substance use, or active substance use, but also does not prevent folks with this lived/living experience from participating.



Partners in the community and across Canada who are experts in the inclusion of lived and living experience of substance use in community work have developed extensive guidelines and frameworks.

The SPRP is currently following the recommendations and processes outlined in **Hear Us, See Us, Respect Us - Respecting the Expertise of People Who Use Drugs** authored by the **Canadian Drug Policy Coalition** and the **Canadian Association of People Who Use Drugs (CAPUD)** in 2021.

"Just because I use drugs doesn't mean I am stupid."

"If someone asked me what I needed when I was in the deepest part of my addiction I may not have been able to answer—now in recovery, I can answer that question very clearly."

Policy and Practice for equity-based inclusion

Key Benefits of Centering the Voices of Lived and Living Experience.

1. Improves Relevance and Effectiveness

People with lived and living experience bring firsthand knowledge of how systems, services, and policies are experienced in practice. Their insights help ensure programs and solutions address real needs rather than assumed needs.

2. Identifies Barriers Invisible to Systems

Those directly affected by poverty, housing insecurity, substance use, discrimination, disability, or other challenges often see barriers that professionals and institutions may overlook. Their perspectives reveal gaps, unintended consequences, and opportunities for improvement.

3. Creates Better Outcomes

When people with lived and living experience help design, implement, and evaluate initiatives, services are more accessible, responsive, and effective, leading to stronger individual and community outcomes.

4. Strengthens Equity and Inclusion

Including lived and living experience shifts decision-making from being done **for** people to being done **with** people. This promotes meaningful participation, reduces power imbalances, and advances equity.

5. Builds Trust and Legitimacy

Communities are more likely to engage with initiatives when they see themselves reflected in leadership, planning, and decision-making processes. This increases trust, credibility, and community buy-in.

6. Enhances Innovation

People who navigate complex challenges every day develop creative strategies and practical solutions. Their expertise often leads to innovative approaches that conventional systems may not consider.

“Ask me how to improve the way things work—I LIVE the issues, but nobody thinks my perspectives could be right.”



7. Transforms Experience into Expertise

Lived and living experience represents a valuable form of expertise. Recognizing and compensating this knowledge validates the contributions of community members and enriches collective understanding.

8. Strengthens Community Capacity

Meaningful engagement creates opportunities for leadership development, skill building, employment, and civic participation, strengthening both individuals and communities.

9. Advances Reconciliation and Social Justice

For Indigenous peoples and other historically marginalized communities, centering lived and living experience helps challenge colonial and exclusionary practices while creating space for self-determination, dignity, and community-led solutions.

“One of the best parts of this process was talking with other people who have the same issues that I have—I thought I was alone, that there was something wrong with me, but I learned that wasn’t true!”



Policy and Practice for equity-based inclusion

Key Challenges of Centering the Voices of Lived and Living Experience.

1. Tokenism

People with lived and living experience may be invited to participate but have little influence over decisions. Engagement becomes symbolic rather than meaningful when their perspectives are not reflected in outcomes.

2. Power Imbalances

Traditional decision-making structures often place professionals, funders, and institutions in positions of authority. These dynamics can make it difficult for lived experience experts to contribute equally or challenge dominant perspectives.

3. Lack of Compensation

Organizations frequently expect people to share their expertise, time, and personal experiences without appropriate compensation, despite compensating other forms of expertise.

4. Emotional and Psychological Burden

Repeatedly sharing personal experiences of poverty, discrimination, trauma, homelessness, or system involvement can be emotionally taxing and potentially retraumatizing if appropriate supports are not in place.

5. Limited Accessibility

Barriers such as transportation, childcare, technology access, language, literacy, scheduling, and physical accessibility can prevent meaningful participation.



"I have volunteered before and been paid with a \$10 gift card—everyone else there was working and getting paid actual money."

6. Representation Challenges

No single individual can represent the experiences of an entire community. Organizations may unintentionally rely on a small number of voices rather than seeking diverse perspectives that reflect different identities, experiences, and realities.

7. Capacity and Readiness

Organizations may lack the skills, resources, policies, or cultural readiness needed to effectively engage lived and living experience partners in a meaningful way.

8. Trust and Relationship Building

Many individuals with lived and living experience have experienced exclusion, discrimination, or broken promises from institutions. Building authentic relationships requires time, consistency, transparency, and accountability.

9. Balancing Expertise

Tensions can arise when lived experience knowledge differs from professional, academic, or organizational perspectives. Successful engagement requires valuing multiple forms of knowledge equally.

10. Sustaining Engagement

Engagement often occurs on a project-by-project basis rather than being embedded into organizational culture and governance. This can lead to burnout, frustration, and a lack of long-term impact.

11. Risk of Extractive Practices

Organizations may collect stories, feedback, and insights without sharing decision-making power or demonstrating how contributions influenced outcomes. This can leave participants feeling used rather than valued.

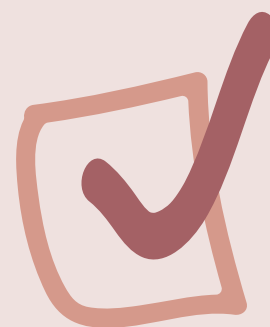
12. Measuring Impact

It can be challenging to demonstrate how lived and living experience contributions directly influenced decisions, policies, or outcomes, making it difficult to assess the effectiveness of engagement efforts.

Moving from Challenge to Opportunity

Successful lived and living experience engagement approaches are built on:

- Compensation and recognition
- Shared power and decision-making
- Accessibility and inclusion
- Trauma-informed and culturally safe practices
- Relationship-based approaches
- Capacity building and leadership development
- Clear accountability and feedback loops
- Long-term commitment rather than one-time consultation



SPRP Recommendations

Disrupting Conventional Systems

Moving forward, the SPRP is focused on meaningful understanding and implementation of a lived, living and learned experience expert inclusion framework with clear policies and practices. As leaders in Saskatchewan and across Canada, we encourage the community agencies, governments, and partners to consider their current practices and work to achieve the standards outlined in this framework.

The following are the key recommendations and implementation strategy for the SPRP:

1

Alleviating the pressures connected to financial barriers

- a. Focus on creating the process as part of a strategy for “meaningful employment”
- b. Create contracts for services rather than tokenistic, honouraria-based systems.
- c. Create an equity-based framework to allocate financial resources based on needs and elimination of barriers to participate

2

Advocacy for the inclusion of lived and living experience in policy design

- a. Creating of community practice
- b. Co-lead and co-developed
- c. Funded access for community partners who cannot internally resource this process appropriately

3

Advocacy for the inclusion of lived and living experience in all community research

- Creation of connections to the community practice
- Building relationships with Post-Secondary Researchers
- Research funded access for community partners to support the other 2 recommendations

Are you ready to get started but don't know where to start?

Checklist: Readiness to Include People with Lived Experience of Poverty

→ Organizational Mindset

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- ☐ Leadership and staff value lived and living experience as expertise.
- ☐ Commitment to equity, inclusion, and anti-oppression is clear and articulated.

→ Purpose and Intent

- ☐ Willingness to share power and decision-making authority.
- ☐ Commitment to long-term inclusion, not one-off consultation.
- ☐ Clear understanding of why people with lived experience are being included.
- ☐ Defined goals for roles, responsibilities, and scope of influence.
- ☐ Prepared to listen and act on input, not just consult.
- ☐ Willingness to adapt processes based on feedback.

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→ Financial and Logistical Support

- ☐ Budget for appropriate compensation.
- ☐ Resources for transportation, childcare, or other participation costs.
- ☐ Accessible and safe meeting locations (physical or virtual).
- ☐ Flexibility in scheduling and time commitments.

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→ Trauma-Informed and Accessible Spaces

- ☐ Meeting spaces and processes are trauma-informed and culturally safe.
- ☐ Opportunities for breaks, quiet spaces, and mental health support if needed.
- ☐ Communication materials are plain language and accessible.

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→ Policies and Processes

- ☐ Clear roles, expectations, and pathways for influence are defined.
- ☐ Transparent decision-making and accountability mechanisms are in place.
- ☐ Policies to avoid tokenism and ensure continuous engagement.
- ☐ Mechanisms to gather feedback from participants on accessibility, safety, and meaningful engagement.

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→ Relationship and Trust Building

- ☐ Willingness to invest time to build authentic relationships.
- ☐ Mentorship or support for participants who may lack prior experience in policy, advocacy, or research.
- ☐ Commitment to reciprocity, recognition, and honoring contributions.

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→ Equity and Diversity Considerations

- ☐ Intentionally reach out to those most affected and marginalized.
- ☐ Understand intersectional barriers (race, gender, disability, newcomer status)
- ☐ Include Indigenous, racialized, and other communities with culturally safe practices where relevant.

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Many of the images in this document were created using artificial intelligence (AI) to respectfully represent the experiences, diversity, and realities of community members. Rather than relying on photographs of people experiencing poverty or vulnerability, AI-generated imagery was intentionally used to protect privacy, preserve dignity, and avoid exploitative or voyeuristic portrayals. These images are symbolic representations intended to support learning, reflection, and understanding and do not depict actual individuals or events.

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From Experience to Expertise:

Centering Lived & Living Experience in Inclusive and Equitable Community Practice

"Belonging begins when people are seen not for their needs, but for their strengths. When lived experience is welcomed as expertise, individuals move from isolation to connection, and communities become places where every voice has value."



Contact

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Saskatoon Poverty
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