

# Inclusion of People with Lived Experience (PWLE) in the Toronto Alliance to End Homelessness

Recommendations and Final Report – November 2018





## Introduction

By Kira Heineck, Executive Lead, TAEH

This report represents the excellent and committed work done by the TAEH’s People With Lived Experience Working Group (PWLE WG) over the last year. Readers will note the careful thought and smart, strategic thinking that went into this work and this final report, including its recommendations for next steps. What this report cannot do, however, is capture the scope of the creative energy, good will and focussed attention this group brought to their work over many meetings and discussions.

They have given the TAEH solid direction and a challenge to action – a call to break ground in how organizations aiming to end homelessness can truly include people with lived experience in all aspects of the work.

I myself have learnt much and look forward to continuing to work with this group, and others, in moving forward to ensure nothing is said, done or decided about people with lived experience of homelessness without them. A big thank you to the support of everyone in getting us this far. We could not have done it without the generous commitment of the Dream-Team of the time and efforts of **Joanna Pawelkiewicz**. Joanna expertly and compassionately both supported and led this group through its deliberations. **Matthew Huxley**, hired on as TAEH’s Ambassador of Lived Experience in 2017 to coordinate this work provided steady leadership and continuous motivation to everyone. Matthew also wrote this report, skillfully aided by **Teri Freeman**, a Ryerson University Social Work student currently in placement with the TAEH.

Onwards!

## Report Outline

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## **1. How the Person's with Lived Experience (PWLE) Reference Group came together**

The TAEH PWLE Reference Group is comprised of a group of individuals whom have experienced homelessness, including individuals who have also struggled with mental health issues. The group included nine members of various backgrounds and circumstances, including: Indigenous people, newcomers, refugees, and people who have encountered incarceration, which make up a large portion of the homeless community. The group met for seven two-hour meetings and discussed a variety of ideas and challenges faced by their peers and community members. Thoughts were centred around how they could help make changes in the systems. The group was facilitated by Joanna Pawelkiewicz of the Dream-Team, who hosted the group at the Houselink offices on Bloor Street West and supported by the TAEH Secretariat

An idea that we thought was important to stress, was that there must be inclusion of Persons with Lived Experience (PWLE) at every level of Toronto Alliance to End Homelessness (TAEH). We chose to adopt the “Nothing About Us, Without Us” governance model to ensure that there is inclusion in the decision-making process. We believe that this will be a major first step towards ending tokenism, as there has been a consensus that although we are seen, we are not often enough heard. We have proposed that a timeline for specific goals should be set and attempted given this is a new idea, and a hope for full inclusion may be difficult to achieve.

These individuals showed expertise and value through lived experience that is invaluable to the idea of ending homelessness. The PWLE group had a lot of great ideas and passion for this cause and would like to thank you for your support and sincerity to the project.

## **2. Key recommendations - Summary**

Some of the working group's recommendations for the board that were decided during the group meetings are:

1. To adopt a “Nothing about Us Without Us” governance model, or to agree to our commitment date within twelve months.
2. This, in turn, involves the creation and support of the PWLE Caucus.
3. To establish a mentorship program.
4. To hire a PWLE Ambassador.

## **3. Chosen model for participation**

The Reference Group reviewed 3 different models of governance and chose to adopt ‘Nothing About Us without Us’. We chose this model because we strongly believe that it is important to include those affected by homelessness in the decision-making process. Under this model, PWLE's would be integrated in every aspect of the TAEH, including the Steering Committee and the Secretariat.

#### 4. Who is a 'PWLE of homelessness'?

For TAEH, the PWLE Reference Group defines PWLE as the following:

*A PWLE is a person who has been, or currently is homeless. We want to honour and include people who have experienced different types and lengths of homelessness, if being homeless was a significant part of their life.*

We strongly believe that individuals who are still experiencing homelessness, poverty or other forms of marginalization should make up the majority of the PWLE caucus. Nonetheless, we welcome and seek mentorship from PWLEs who may currently work within social services, especially the housing sector.

#### 5. Caucus Purpose and Structure

**Definition:**

The word "caucus" comes from an Algonquian word *caucaasu*, meaning counselor. A caucus is a group of people who share a certain mindset or similar concerns and gather to share counsel together.

**Proposed Structure & Processes for TAEH's PWLE Caucus**

**Objectives:**

1. To create space for PWLE to share their experiences at TAEH & support each other.
2. To be spokes people for TAEH.
3. To provide training on sector issues and other relevant skills.
4. To discuss strategies and positions that the Caucus would like the TAEH adopt, prioritizing a PWLE perspective.

**Membership:** PWLE who want to be recognized as official PWLE representatives.

**Size:** 7-12 individuals, depending on how many PWLE are embedded in TAEH.

**Process:** Initially, a 3-person panel will interview those interested in joining the caucus. The panel will weigh the following when making their decisions:

*Adherence to PWLE definition:* A PWLE is a person who has been, or currently is homeless. We want to honour and include people who have experienced different types and lengths of homelessness, if being homeless was a significant part of their life.

*Diversity:* Representation of different communities affected by homelessness, different types of homelessness (emphasis on those with expertise of chronic or episodic homelessness).

*Availability & commitment:* Daytime availability, commitment of 1 year, commitment to ongoing education.

*Passion & motivation:* Why do they want to join TAEH? Why do they care about homelessness?

*Skills:* Lived expertise, systems knowledge, useful skills (ex: being able to community through IT).

*Reference check:* Candidate will be asked to provide 2 references who can speak to their reliability and ability to work with others.

**Accountability:** We have had numerous conversations amongst ourselves about how PWLE Caucus members can keep each other accountable. We want to ensure that each member is truly passionate about this work, participating actively, and that they fulfill all their obligations (ex: attendance at meetings, being responsive to communication).

We want to create a system whereby we hold each other accountable, but that we do not feel policed or punished, as can often be the case for low-income people. We think an accountability system should be top of the agenda at the first Caucus meeting. We have not fully flushed out our ideas around this, but we have one working idea:

At each PWLE Caucus meeting, each member must do a summary report of what their work for the last 3 months, including the activities and approximate times. Each member then assesses to what extent they have met their TAEH obligations and assigns a numerical value:

- 100% I have attended virtually all the meetings and events I was supposed to. I have been very responsive to communication.
- 75% I have attended most of the meetings and events I was supposed to. For the most part, I have been responsive to communication.
- 50% I have only attended about half of the events/meetings that I was supposed to. I have been in communication about half of the time.

Each member then hands in their summary sheet to TAEH and is compensated according to their self-assessment (e.g.: 75% means they receive \$75% of the honoraria norm). Any member who assesses themselves at 50% or lower must provide some information to the Caucus about what has prevented them from participating better and what is their plan for increasing their participation. The Caucus then decides if the person can continue being on the Caucus, or if they need to take a leave of absence until their circumstances change or if they should step down from the Caucus altogether.

## 7. Cultural Audit

Since its inception, PWLEs have not been a significant part of TAEH's organizational development. This means that TAEH has developed a 'culture', meaning a way of functioning that has not specifically considered the needs of PWLE. For example, TAEH heavily relies on email for communication, while the PWLE Reference Group mostly used phones and text messages.

The Reference Group recommends that TAEH undergoes a 'cultural audit' within the next twelve months with a special focus on what changes need to be made to be a welcoming environment for a diverse group of PWLEs. These changes need to be meaningful, yet realistic. For example, it is not possible for TAEH to stop using email, but could TAEH help to bridge the 'digital gap'?

### *How to do this?*

Given limited time and resources, we suggest that TAEH either assigns this to one of the current placement students or ideally, recruits a cultural anthropology student. The student(s) should work closely with the Caucus on the audit. At a minimum, the audit should include interviews with staff, leadership and Caucus members, observations and collection of best practices.

### *Deliverable*

The first audit could have modest objectives, such as a list of recommendations about what TAEH should start doing, what they should stop doing or what they should continue doing. Ideally, TAEH's leadership should receive some training on how to work across difference, how to be an ally, best practices for holding accessible meetings.

## **8. Mentorship**

**Overview:** Each Caucus member is matched with a long-time member of TAEH or Steering Committee. The pairs meet 4 times a year, the first meeting should be a 'coffee date' focusing on getting to know each other.

### *Objectives:*

- To create a welcoming and friendly atmosphere for PWLE.
- To demonstrate strong buy-in of PWLE involvement on the part of TAEH leadership.
- To build rapport and trust between PWLE and allies.
- To share expertise.
- To facilitate PWLE learning of 'the system'.
- To connect PWLE with workers in the sector.

## **9. Permanent PWLE Ambassador and Coordinator**

*Overview:* A permanent, flexible, part-time position of a PWLE on the staff team.

*Workload:* Even split between skill & knowledge building (including shadowing TAEH staff), Caucus support/coordination and other TAEH duties (including being PWLE advocate, support to caucus and spokesperson).

### *Key qualifications:*

- Experience with coordination or organizing groups.
- Combination of lived expertise and systems knowledge.
- Good public presentations.
- Strong administrative skills (computer, email, typing etc.).

## 10. Proposed timeline

| Activity  | November | December | January | February | March | April | May | June | July | August |
|---|----------|----------|---------|----------|-------|-------|-----|------|------|--------|
| Discussion of why PWLE should be incorporated in TAEH                                       |          |          |         |          |       |       |     |      |      |        |
| Undergo an organizational audit to gauge readiness and accessibility for PWLE participation |          |          |         |          |       |       |     |      |      |        |
| Develop commitment statement about PWLE involvement   |          |          |         |          |       |       |     |      |      |        |
| Accept recommendations from PWLE report   |          |          |         |          |       |       |     |      |      |        |
| Secure funds to support caucus and part-time PWLE position                                  |          |          |         |          |       |       |     |      |      |        |
| Post PWLE Ambassador job  |          |          |         |          |       |       |     |      |      |        |
| Receive findings of audit and commit to making a minimum of 3 organizational changes        |          |          |         |          |       |       |     |      |      |        |
| Interviews and hiring of PWLE Ambassador  |          |          |         |          |       |       |     |      |      |        |
| Recruit members of PWLE caucus panel  |          |          |         |          |       |       |     |      |      |        |
| Hold 1st caucus meeting   |          |          |         |          |       |       |     |      |      |        |
| Match Steering Committee members with PWLE for mentorship program                           |          |          |         |          |       |       |     |      |      |        |
| Facilitate PWLE joining 3 working groups  |          |          |         |          |       |       |     |      |      |        |
| 1st mentorship meeting (can happen anytime)   |          |          |         |          |       |       |     |      |      |        |
| Hold 2nd caucus meeting   |          |          |         |          |       |       |     |      |      |        |
| Have PWLE representation in all 3 working groups  |          |          |         |          |       |       |     |      |      |        |
| Hold 3rd caucus meeting   |          |          |         |          |       |       |     |      |      |        |

## 11. Budgetary implications

### Recommendations:

That every PWLE Caucus member who participates in TAEH in an active, consistent and meaningful way is financially compensated for their contributions similarly to non-PWLE members (the vast majority of whom do TAEH work on paid time).

So, what would this look like? Initially, each member of the PWLE caucus would contribute a total of 5 hours a month worth of labour to TAEH. This estimate was based on the following calculation:

| Activity   | Number of Hours per Year |
|--|--------------------------|
| Quarterly Caucus meetings--3 hours each meeting  | 12                       |
| Active participation on 1 working group--monthly meetings about 2 hours long   | 24                       |
| Communication: email communication, reading relevant e-newsletters and bulletins, researching issues when needed—30 minutes/week | 24                       |
| Significant events or all TAEH meetings—minimum of 2 a year, 3 hours in length   | 6                        |
| Total 66 hours x minimum wage (\$14/hour) =\$924/per person annually   |                          |
| Total 66 hours x living wage (\$19/hour <sup>i</sup> )=\$1254/per person annually  |                          |
| Total based on full participation of 6 PWLE Caucus members in the first year <b>\$5940-\$7524</b>                                |                          |

Since we have no knowledge of TAEH operating budget and expenses (at the time of reference group meetings), we don't know if this amount is realistic. We are therefore making some recommendations:

- a. That TAEH continue to commit to including a PWLE Caucus budget line in all future funding applications or fundraising initiatives.
- b. That TAEH provide some financial literacy training to the Caucus and give quarterly overview of income & expenses on the PWLE Caucus budget.
- c. That TAEH include PWLE Caucus members in the decision making about how the PWLE budget be allocated. For example, ask us if we would prefer to be provided with a meal at our Caucus meetings or if we would rather extra cash?
- d. That TAEH begin by compensating Caucus members on a quarterly or monthly basis.

**SEE next pages for APPENDIX I:** Summary of preliminary results presented at September 2018 TAEH Steering Committee



# Summary of Recommendations

## Core Members of the PWLE Reference

### Background

Convened by the Dream Team, the PWLE Reference Group began meeting in February. Members were recruited through various organizations including Across Boundaries, The Native Women’s Resource Centre, the John Howard Society and Covenant House.

The Reference Group met 7 times over the course of several months.

This is a short summary of our key recommendations. The full report outlining our work is currently in draft form and will be ready by the October Steering Committee meeting.



*Hanad, Youssef, Mahmoud, Matthew, Esther & Daniela*

### Governance Model

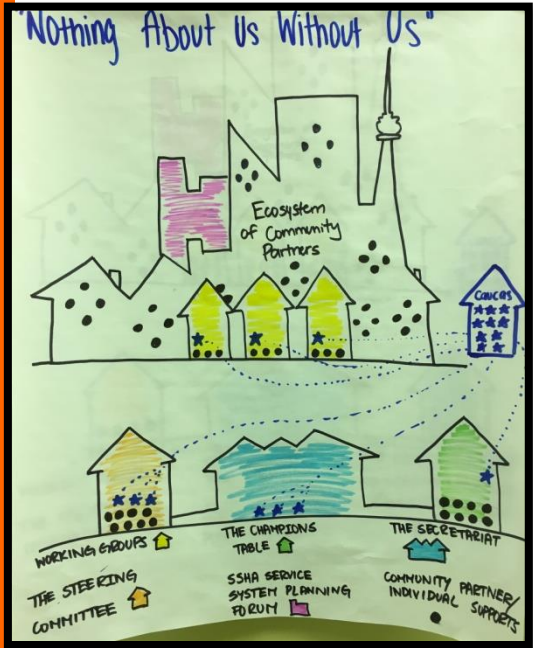
We reviewed various governance models and unanimously chose one we are calling Nothing About Us without Us.

We were greatly influenced by 7 principals for leadership and inclusion of people with lived experience of homelessness developed by the PWLE Caucus at the 2016 CAEH conference.

Under this model, PWLEs would be integrated in every aspect of TAEH, including the Steering Committee and the Secretariat.

In addition, we recommend establishing a PWLE Caucus, which would meet 4 times a year in order to:

1. To create space for PWLE to share their experiences at TAEH & support each other
2. To provide training on sector issues and other relevant skills
3. To discuss strategies & positions that the Caucus



*PWLEs are represented by stars.*

## Changing the Culture

Since its inception, PWLEs have not been a significant part of TAEH's organizational development. This means that TAEH has developed a 'culture' meaning a way of functioning that has not specifically considered the needs of PWLE. For example, TAEH heavily relies on email for communication, while the PWLE Reference Group mostly used phones and text messages.

The Reference Group recommends that TAEH undergoes a 'cultural audit' within the next 12 months with a special focus on what changes need to be made in order to be a welcoming environment for a diverse group of PWLEs. These changes need to be meaningful, yet realistic. For example, it is not possible for TAEH to stop using email, but could TAEH help to bridge the 'digital gap'?

## Remuneration

*Recommendation:* that every PWLE Caucus member who participates in TAEH in an active, consistent and meaningful way is financially compensated for their contributions similarly to non-PWLE members (the vast majority of whom do TAEH work on paid time).

We understand that TAEH is operating under



## Accountability

We have had numerous conversations amongst other selves about how PWLE Caucus members can keep each other accountable. We want to ensure that each member is truly passionate about this work, that they participate actively and that they fulfill all their obligations (ex: attendance at meetings, being responsive to communication).

## Timeline

Organizational change takes time and we have created a timeline for the implementation of our recommendations. For example, we suggest that the PWLE Caucus consist of 6 members in its first year and that the permanent paid (part-time) PWLE position be established in the early spring of 2019.

## Mentorship

We want to build strong relationships between the PWLEs and the leadership of TAEH.

We propose a mentorship program whereby each PWLE Caucus member is matched with a member of the Steering Committee or a Working Group chair. The pair will meet several times throughout the year in order to learn about each other and share expertise.

### Key Recommendation

1. We ask that the Steering Committee endorse the full inclusion and integration of PWLEs in TAEH.
2. We ask that the Steering Committee direct the staff team to develop and carry out a work plan that helps TAEH achieve full integration of PWLEs within 12 months. Please see our full report for more details.

## **APPENDIX II: PWLE Reference Group Bios**

### ***Mahmood***

Mahmood became homeless in 1997 for over two years and had to sleep in High Park and a Country Time coffee shop during that period. He eventually stayed in a shelter for three months before securing housing in the community. Mahmood lived in four different apartments after that and has been settled in a supportive housing unit for the last three years where he reports that he is happy.

Mahmood decided to become a part of the PWLE group after he “tried it and liked it” and wants to help other people who are homeless to change their lives.

Mahmood hopes that the TAEH will be able to help people to find housing and give people pocket change if they are on the streets.

Mahmood enjoys working out three times per week and swimming twice a week and reports that “getting strong” is one of his accomplishments. Mahmood reports that he was born in Kuwait and grew up in Jordon and has been a member of Across Boundaries for the last five years.

### ***Matthew***

Matthew is a non-status Indigenous person that spent most of his life, from a very young age, in “the system”. Matthew has also spent 20 to 22 years on the streets struggling to live. Matthew has recently secured housing with his family members.

Matthew believes that homeless people will need to be given a voice, and a seat at the table to accurately share the difficulties that members in their community have in common. The people that are living these realities need to be accurately depicted and received by decision makers.

Matthew wanted to be a part of the PWLE group at TAEH to stand up and try to get a voice in the crowd, so he can speak out about the issues surrounding poverty. Matthew believes that PWLE need to have a voice and will eventually be involved in helping solve the general goal of ending homelessness and poverty.

Matthew has come a long way in his life, but the only thing that kept him going was realizing that he had the power to change what he was going through.

### ***Esther***

Esther became homeless because of domestic violence in 1998. Esther slept under a bridge for three months until she ended up at a shelter for women. From there, Esther was housed in a co-op for over ten years in the Annex where she is very happy.

Esther thinks that homelessness can be ended by building more affordable housing and investing more in mental health and addictions because half of the homeless people suffer from one form or another of either mental health or addictions.

Esther feels passionate about the PWLE group helping and being a part of a group that fights to end homelessness.

Esther hopes that TAEH's mission to end homelessness in Canada by 2020 is fulfilled but they have the will of government foresight and support.

Esther has a dream about becoming a writer and writing about her life experiences. She enjoys reading, photography, documentaries and taking walks.

### ***Yusuf***

Yusuf became homeless because of his addiction challenges. Yusuf suffered a head injury during this period which made his situation worse and he ended up in and out of jail. It was during one of his court appearances that he was connected to a mental health court support worker at CMHA who encouraged him to meet with a psychiatrist for a mental health assessment in 2000. It was then that Yusuf was diagnosed, began treatment and has been stable since. Yusuf moved into permanent supportive housing in 2001 and eventually moved into his own apartment with supports as needed.

Yusuf believes that homelessness can be eradicated by building houses.

Yusuf joined the PWLE group because of the staff and the need to help. Yusuf stated that it makes him feel useful and want to help other people. Yusuf hopes to work at ending homelessness by contributing through his volunteer efforts.

Yusuf feels very lucky to be alive and to have the opportunity to help the TAEH because in his country of origin he would have been killed because of his addiction challenges.

### ***Hanad***

Hanad has been homeless three different times in his life and which were bad experiences that resulted in his physical and mental health challenges. Hanad had nowhere to go and did not want to go shelters because of witnessing previous violent incidents. Hanad was eventually able to access permanent supportive housing and has been there ever since.

Hanad believes that more homes need to be built and there must be political will to end homelessness.

Hanad wanted to be a part on the PWLE group because of his own experiences with homelessness. Hanad believes that every individual has different experiences of homelessness and that the stories of homeless victims need to be told.

### ***Daniela***

Daniela decided to leave her family home when she was 16 years old due to violence and abuse. She moved to Toronto and "couch-surfed" for four years eventually securing a room in a rooming house where she lived for a year before renting her first apartment where she stayed for 43 "glorious" years. This gave her the opportunity to finish high school and complete one year of college.

Daniela believes that prevention is the key to ending homelessness and people should not lose their homes in the first place. She thinks that policy changes need to happen at the highest levels of the housing tribunal where there are obvious biases against people with low incomes.

Daniela decided to join the PWLE group because of her experiences with housing issues and poverty and wishes the "powers that be" will take the issues of homelessness and poverty seriously as it is people's lives that they are "toying" with.

Daniela was also part of a contingent of activists who presented a report to the UN in Geneva to advocate for housing to be a human right. More recently, she has been a representative at Sistering for 10 years and a board member for six years. She is also a member of the Fair Fare Coalition for eight years.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a 2015 calculation of a living wage in Toronto (\$18.52) [www.ontariolivingwage.ca](http://www.ontariolivingwage.ca)