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PEER WORK IN FRANCE, THE NETHERLANDS AND BELGIUM: A “NEW” PROFESSION IN THE PROCESS OF BECOMING INSTITUTIONALIZED

RESPEER
RESTRUCTURING SOCIAL SECTOR PEER WORKERS INTERVENTION

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PRESENTATION OF PROJECT PARTNERS

Project Coordinator (France)

The Haute Ecole du Travail et de l'Intervention Sociale (HETIS) is a higher education institution delivering training programs for careers in social work and social intervention since 1937. HETIS develops interdisciplinary research and study activities in the field of social intervention, as well as innovative training programs that respond to the needs of professionals, such as the one developed here for peer workers in social services.

Project Partner (Belgium)

Since its creation in 2001, The Réseau Nomade (administratively supported by the ASBL Dune) has positioned itself as an information center and a tool for promoting a culture of participation and empowerment. It brings together and supports stakeholders involved in this approach within the social and health sector in Brussels, including peer mediators and peer helpers. It has been officially recognized by the Brussels administration (Commission communautaire française – COCOF) as a health network since 2009.

Project Partner (the Netherlands)

Nidos is the certified youth care organisation that is responsible for guardianship and part of the reception of all unaccompanied and separated children in the Netherlands. Nidos Intercultural Mediation Department deploys intercultural mediators with migration background to support unaccompanied minors.

Project Partner (France)

For over a century, the Fondation de Nice (FdN), a public-interest foundation, has been supporting the most vulnerable populations, working to change perceptions of poverty, to experiment with innovative social practices and initiatives, and to empower individuals to freely choose their own life paths. It has been engaging peer workers since 2020, who are involved across various social service departments.

INTRODUCTION

Historically rooted in self-support, mutual aid and user movements, peer support is undergoing progressive institutionalization and professionalization: first in the field of health — and particularly in mental health — and then, more recently, in several areas of social work.
From the 1990s onwards, with the spread of recovery-oriented approaches, a paradigm shift took place: people who had experienced mental health problems were no longer considered only as beneficiaries or users, but as support actors, capable of mobilizing their experience to support other people and contribute to transforming practices.

The decade from 2000 to 2010 then saw a rapid expansion of paid peer support in several countries, supported by the development of training programs, certification processes, and, depending on the context, dedicated funding mechanisms (in France, for example, the pilot program for peer health mediators). Peer support thus gradually shifted from a primarily voluntary form of mutual aid to an increasingly structured function within organizations, while also broadening its areas of intervention beyond mental health, particularly into various fields of social work.

While in the health sector peer work now seems to be consolidating and its relevance is no longer being debated, this is not the case in the social sector where experiences are not yet numerous and the difficulties identified are numerous.
The institutionalization of peer work in the field of social work is fraught with significant tensions. It encounters the difficulty of clearly defining the role of peer workers as professionals, of identifying and stabilizing their missions and areas of intervention, and of considering their integration within teams composed of qualified professionals from "traditional" social and health professions.

The issues of recognition, legitimacy, but also stigmatization and power relations within organizations, remain central.

At the same time, professionalization brings to light a central epistemological and practical question: how to objectify experiential knowledge without reducing it to mere testimony, or dissolving it into professional norms that would risk neutralizing its specificity? Through what process is lived experience transformed into intervention knowledge, beyond testimony?

It is not enough to simply acknowledge the existence of experiential knowledge. It is also necessary to describe concretely how it operates in professional activity and under what conditions it translates into mobilizable, transmissible, and assessable skills. While the idea that peer support produces its own positive effects—difficult to reduce to the skills of more "traditional" support professions—is now gaining consensus, the mechanisms that explain and enable these effects remain insufficiently elucidated. They are too rarely documented at the level of practices and working conditions. This dimension is central to the legitimization and recognition of peer work as a profession.

INTRODUCTION

The work carried out within this European project highlights a common trend: in France, the Netherlands, and Belgium, the institutionalization of peer work is clearly underway but remains marked by a persistent tension between its increasing visibility and the ongoing difficulties in recognizing and integrating peer workers into teams, and in ensuring the long-term security of their working conditions. Nevertheless, each RES-PEER partner is engaged in a constructive process of reflection and experimentation. All partners are gradually adjusting their practices, learning on the job, and building on best practices and lessons learned. This process, however, unfolds according to different national contexts, and each organization operates within a specific institutional and professional framework.

This is precisely the objective of this comparative work: to compare these ways of doing things, to identify invariants and conditions for success, and to develop a reference model that can serve as a benchmark for the legitimation and consolidation of peer work.

We will therefore highlight the various challenges and obstacles encountered by the partner organizations, as well as the solutions they are developing and testing to address them. The analysis will systematically draw on existing scientific literature and on data collected since the start of the project—interviews, videoconferences with experts, and study visits—in order to closely link theoretical frameworks and lessons learned from the field.

Summary

I - INTEGRATION OF THE PEER WORKER WITHIN A TEAM

Integrating a peer worker into a team involves balancing three dimensions: individual, team, and structural. It's not simply a matter of "adding a position" but of working with professional boundaries and renegotiating the rules of the work group so that the peer worker finds a place that is meaningful for them, for the team, and for the institution. The main risks are, on the one hand, exposing the peer worker to their past experiences and vulnerabilities and, on the other hand, relegating them to the sidelines, confining them to the role of a subcontractor tasked with jobs defined by others and sometimes perceived as less valuable.

Recruiting a peer worker should therefore not be a matter of delegating or outsourcing tasks. Hence the need to define their place, their role, and the working arrangements with the team, as well as to identify the skills they can bring to the table based on their lived experience. Peer work finds its full place within an institution when their mandate and responsibilities are clearly defined and their specific expertise is recognized and objectively validated.

In other words, teams must be able to explicitly identify the added value of the peer worker: what he/she brings that is unique, different and complementary.

The integration of the peer worker within a team is prepared and co-constructed before and after recruitment.

The first step is therefore to prepare the teams and dispel fears.

Preparing the team and supporting integration over time: the peer worker integration "journey"

Since peer work remains relatively unknown in the social work sector, social workers express reservations that often relate to issues of professional boundaries and recognition.

These reservations are manifested, for example, by pointing out the vagueness of the role, scope of intervention and responsibilities of the peer worker, or that peer work is considered as a less expensive alternative, which can replace positions held by qualified professionals, remains very present.
This concern is accompanied by issues of recognition and legitimacy: the valorization of experiential knowledge can be perceived as a competition with professional knowledge (training, legal and ethical framework, tools and intervention methodologies, field experience), or even as an implicit devaluation of the expertise of social workers.
Added to this is the risk of reducing peer support work to a purely "relational" function, implicitly assigning technical and administrative tasks to social workers. Such a caricatured division of labor impoverishes the work and prevents any real sense of complementarity.
Finally, a significant part of the resistance relates to the issue of recovery and vulnerability: social workers may wonder to what extent the peer worker is sufficiently stabilized, how to anticipate possible vulnerabilities, and what the consequences would be for the team and the public being supported.
This also translates into the fear of having to "take charge" of the peer workers, to protect them, to compensate for their difficulties, or to assume an additional responsibility (informal supervision, increased vigilance, management of possible crisis situations).

One of the main obstacles to integrating a peer worker into a team of social workers therefore stems from the reluctance and fears of these professionals.

This means that the integration of a peer worker does not rely solely on the individual and their ability to adapt, but depends just as much on the preparation of the team and the organizational tools put in place.

The arrival of a peer worker, in the case of a job that is still under construction, cannot be treated as the "classic" entry of a new employee who is asked to adapt to the existing context, but involves organizational changes requiring specific support.

The role of the peer worker is not simply "placed" in a team, it is prepared, framed and supported.

The **PAT (Peer and Team) project** is particularly enlightening in this regard. Led by the Brussels-based non-profit organization SMES (a member of the Nomade Network), PAT has been supporting organizations wishing to recruit peer workers as employees since 2020. Integration is conceived as a progressive and structured process that begins well before recruitment and takes the form of a genuine trajectory involving several stages:

- immersion in the structure concerned in order to define both the needs, the place of the peer worker and the profile to be recruited;
- raising awareness and equipping teams (in order to address fears, prejudices and perceptions);
- support for recruitment and then follow-up on integration.

This process can extend from a few months to a year and demonstrates the importance of working on these two dimensions structuring the integration of a peer worker: the collective one and the structural one.

In a way, the implementation of peer support at the **Fondation de Nice (FDN)** also reflects a "pathway" approach. A pioneer in the PACA region in introducing peer support across various social work sectors since 2019, the Fondation de Nice has built the integration of peer workers gradually, through experimentation and on-the-job learning. The role of peer workers has thus "taken shape as it has taken shape," through experimentation within different departments, successive adjustments, and the incorporation of feedback from the field.

This process of continuous learning and adjustment based on feedback from peer workers and teams also led to the revision of job descriptions after the arrival of peer workers. Indeed, initially, the Foundation relied on the Housing First / Working First frameworks to formulate an initial definition of the role.
Then, as the program was rolled out, the role of peer workers was, in several cases, readjusted based on feedback from the field and experience gained—and thus the job descriptions—in order to progressively clarify their missions, the boundaries of their role, and how they would interact with the teams. This post-recruitment adjustment was conducted jointly with the peer workers, taking into account their profiles, skills, and especially the evolution of their tasks and missions since their arrival.

Like the PAT, therefore, but in a different way, the dynamic specific to the FDN also highlights the need to prepare for the arrival of a peer worker before recruitment and the importance of ensuring follow-up of their integration until the stabilization of their role and skills.

The design and structuring of an integration model in the form of a "path" over a period extending beyond the moment of recruitment therefore seems to be a generalizable option.

This involves raising awareness and preparing teams to ensure effective inclusion of peer workers on an equal footing, and structuring a stable professional framework, in other words, identifying the place that the peer worker can occupy in order to work in complementarity with other professionals.

The importance of a stable and structured framework...

The construction of a stable and well-structured framework is the main characteristic of **Nidos**, where peer work takes the form of an **InterCultural Mediation Department**, composed of peer workers with the role of intercultural mediators (ICM).

The ICM have diverse profiles migratory backgrounds and are recruited based on their intercultural and linguistic skills.

Proximity to the unaccompanied minors in care is therefore achieved through shared culture and language and having a shared experience in the asylum process. The Intercultural Mediator Department was created in 2016 with European funding and became an integral and permanent part of Nidos in 2023. This institutionalization was accompanied by efforts to formalize and consolidate the department. The integration of intercultural mediators is strongly secured by the organization, with precise mandates, well-defined roles, clearly visible professional boundaries, and a structured framework for intervention that leaves little room for ambiguity or uncertainty.

As this is still a relatively unknown profession, preparation prior to recruitment in order to reduce uncertainty and ambiguity about "who does what" is of central importance.

This formalization was indeed implemented in response to a major obstacle that emerged during the program's launch: the reluctance of other professionals to consider the risk of "role overlap," meaning the fear that the intercultural mediator might encroach on their responsibilities. This risk is generally reduced when explicit rules and a framework for collaboration clarify everyone's responsibilities and specify "who does what."

...but also the importance of grey zone

The need for a framework was mentioned repeatedly throughout the discussions. The experiences shared highlighted the importance of having a well-defined professional framework. However, some points of concern were also raised, particularly the need for the framework to be flexible enough to allow colleagues to adapt it, adjust to it, and participate in defining their roles. "The framework must not be tyrannical!" (Excerpt from exchanges with the Nidos team during the study visit in France.)

This indicates the importance of emptiness, uncertainty, and areas of uncertainty.

Indeed,

A "grey zone" that may be a source of transformations, representing a space for maneuver and creativity through which the peer worker can contribute to defining their place.

Obviously, the extent of the grey zone can and should vary depending on the field of intervention and the different professional contexts. It is then up to the collective intelligence of the institution to define the boundaries and limits of the peer work's creative space.

One of the strengths of peer work lies precisely in its capacity to "invent" solutions, to find new avenues for action. Peer workers can and must allow themselves to "think outside the box" and to construct "possibilities" other than those dictated by more "recognized" knowledge because it is better understood. It is in the gap with "traditional" social work, in these "grey areas", that peer work can draw a significant part of its legitimacy.

Training to legitimize?

Peer worker training undoubtedly contributes to building legitimacy and recognition among colleagues. Furthermore, it is a need expressed by most of those we met, and one that is also recognized by the teams.

Two types of training needs have been identified: firstly, initial training for peer workers to develop computer skills, public speaking, and writing abilities, as well as to work on narratives and life stories; and secondly, contextual/thematic training focused on each individual's specific area of intervention (migration, homelessness, addiction, etc.) to acquire knowledge of public policies, existing programs, administrative procedures, etc., specific to a given sector.
In this regard, the various existing training practices are identified and analyzed in Part IV of this deliverable.

II - ROLE AND PLACE OF THE PEER WORKER

(within an institution and a team)

Working on the integration of peer workers means addressing the question of their role. However, constructing this role, both within an institution and a team, involves a tension between recognizing the peer worker as a fully-fledged professional, a member of a collective, and recognizing their expertise derived from lived experience as an individual directly affected. This makes it a unique position.

The scientific literature, and in particular the work of **Baptiste Godrie** (2016; 2021), warns against the risk of "integrationism," a mechanism whereby the institution integrates peer workers on the condition that this integration remains compatible with the existing organization (its frameworks, procedures, and hierarchies). This amounts to "integrating" what reinforces existing practices and distancing itself from anything likely to be disruptive (e.g., requests to redefine roles, questioning of practices).

In practice, this logic can translate into partial integration into collective spaces and limited information sharing. The **SMES** guide highlights that, after several years of operation, some peer support workers are still not allowed to attend team meetings, which keeps them on the periphery of arbitration, decision-making, coordination, and the structuring discussions of the work group. These restrictions on meeting participation and information sharing are frequently justified by professional boundaries, particularly the issue of confidentiality.

Eve Gardien (2021) shows that the transition of a person receiving support to the status of an experienced staff member within a multidisciplinary team alters the power dynamic associated with peer relationships and raises the question of what can/should be shared in teamwork. The issue of confidentiality and professional secrecy is frequently raised by social workers as a concern.

Cases where peer workers are recruited without real answers being given to the fears and questions of the teams are still too numerous.

However, half-hearted onboarding is experienced as devaluing or even stigmatizing by peer workers and hinders their skills development and professional growth. While successful onboarding is a process that takes place over a longer period than the recruitment itself, good practices can be adopted to avoid these pitfalls.

Successful integration relies primarily on two complementary elements:

- the acculturation of the team
- the clarification of the intervention areas.

Hence the importance, on the one hand, of building a work culture that recognizes experiential knowledge as a fully-fledged professional resource and explicitly commits to combating stigmatization and disqualification (as we saw earlier in the importance of raising awareness and preparing teams); and on the other hand, the need to define the terms of teamwork upstream (which means specifying: “who does what” and “what information has access to and for what purposes”). Respect for professional secrecy and confidentiality are practices that peer workers can internalize, particularly through their inclusion in spaces for sharing and exchanging information with colleagues.

In terms of observed practices, the role of the peer worker and the forms of work with teams vary according to institutions, audiences, sectors of intervention and the expected level of intervention.

Overall, we were able to identify two major trends:

Trend 1: Peer work is integrated into a service with varied methods of inclusion and interprofessional cooperation. Peer workers are therefore integrated into a team of social workers (FDN, Circé, Dune);

Trend 2: peer work is established as a service in its own right and constitutes a team whose work must be coordinated with other services (Nidos, SPP).

In most cases, it would seem that trend 1) prevails: peer workers are recruited and integrated based on their lived experience in a given field and work with and alongside social workers. This is the case in all the services of the Fondation de Nice, for example, and in most Belgian so-called "low-threshold" support structures where peer support workers operate in what they call "the front line," in other words, in direct contact with the people they support.

In other cases, such as those of the "experts by experience" (“experts du vécu”) of the Belgian Federal Public Service (SPP) and the intercultural mediators of Nidos, which constitute a service in their own right, these variations stem from differences in the roles and missions of peer workers, as well as the professional cultures specific to different countries. In both cases, we can highlight positive dynamics and practices that can be generalized.

Trend 1 ---> The introduction of peer work in a social work service: Inclusion as a condition for integration and recognition (FDN/Circé/Dune)

When peer support is introduced within a service, the observed experiences, although varied, have demonstrated the importance of effectively including the peer worker in the overall team dynamic. This translates into systematic participation in meetings, information sharing, and access to all the files of the individuals being supported—all factors that contribute to strengthening the peer worker's recognition, facilitating their integration into the service's operations, and supporting their skills development.

ASBL L'Ilot, daily reception centre Circé (Brussels)

Circé is a daily reception centre for homeless women, welcoming 45 to 50 women per day with unconditional access, and was designed following action research conducted by professionals and experts with lived experience. One of these experts will be recruited as a peer support worker and integrated into a team of 7 social and health workers.

The peer support worker describes a daily work that is mostly done informally, characterized by a continuous presence of the team in the collective space (meals, dressing, activities, music), and methods of support "through discussions" (simple steps carried out together, administrative support, referral to a social service) and support towards care.

The team's operation is based on a very horizontal distribution of tasks, where all professionals are peers who participate in the same way in the life of the center:

> "I participate in team meetings. For example, on Tuesday mornings we have a team meeting about everything related to the center's operation, the activities we're going to organize, and that sort of thing... And then we have the PMS meeting, which means psycho-medical-social; where we discuss certain users, what we put in place... because here there's no follow-up... in the sense that the whole team is likely to follow a person..." (Peer worker interview)

Tasks are not assigned based on qualifications or professions, as roles rotate. Consequently, tasks are not ranked according to their importance or the value commonly attributed to them, but rather "social workers also do laundry."

> "In the morning, we say to each other: who's doing what today? So, for example, one person will go to reception, two or three will stay in the common area for meals and to walk around, to eat and chat. One will do a social support shift. One will go to the showers to distribute products, do a load of laundry..." (Peer worker interview)

This does not mean that all professionals have the same skills, however this horizontal structure promotes mutual learning and challenges traditional professional practices:

> “There are things I do gradually because I’m learning how to do them. Basically, I’m not a social worker or educator, so some procedures or filling out certain forms... I don’t know how to do them, I don’t have the reflex... But I’m learning as I go.” (Peer worker interview)

Conversely, this openness has effects on the professional practices of female social worker colleagues:

> “A few months ago, my colleagues, because of their training, didn’t allow themselves to talk about themselves, for example, or to get more intimate... Because professionals are taught to maintain a distance... But since I do it and it works, it also allows them to step outside their comfort zone...” (peer worker interview)

Horizontal professional relationships, therefore, transcend the logic of profession and degree, fostering mutual learning and adjustments of frameworks and practices according to principles that fully integrate and recognize experiential knowledge. The team's openness and horizontal governance enable a cross-fertilization of knowledge and a hybridization of approaches, thus promoting exploration and innovation.
This was possible for two main reasons:
1) shared values (feminism and shared governance)
2) Co-construction of the project: the peer support worker is part of the founding core of the project. She participated in the action research and actively contributed to the design of the center.

The team therefore united around a common project; it was born at the same time as the center.

We find this model in a certain way in the structuring of the ULAM service of the Fondation de Nice.

The ULAM service at the Fondation de Nice (Nice)

ULAM (Mobile Housing Support Unit) is a service of the Fondation de Nice deployed in Nice and Cannes, which supports households facing housing problems (prevention of evictions, access to suitable housing, securing and maintaining housing), by linking housing and employment dimensions.

The service was created in 2020 and was conceived as a collective that must "work together" and define its complementary roles. The team consists of social workers, employment counselors, and peer workers.
At the outset, the team members discussed what each could contribute within a multi-referential support framework. Roles were defined less according to job title/status and more according to each individual's interests and skills. This blurred the lines between social support, professional integration, and peer support. It was expected that peer workers would have the same role and perform the same tasks as other professionals, which included, for example, managing partnerships and writing professional reports.

Over time, the places and roles of each person have adjusted according to a horizontality that came less from assigning the same missions and tasks to every member of the team than from adjusting them to the specificity and, above all, the skills of each individual, so that peer workers do not find themselves in an uncomfortable position.

For example, M. explains that he was initially recruited to facilitate contact with households facing eviction (a population often living in fear, who don't open mail or attend court hearings). His role then evolved, and M. gradually specialized in negotiation (with bailiffs, lawyers, and agencies), a skill that was initially unidentified and absent from the department. S., on the other hand, gravitated more towards a role working closely with individuals and supporting colleagues, preferring to be less involved in administrative tasks. Over time, peer workers have managed to carve out an increasingly comfortable position for themselves, given their skills and specific expertise.

ACT (Therapeutic Coordination Apartments) service of the Fondation de Nice

This is a medical and social support service that offers individual, dispersed housing to people with debilitating chronic illnesses. The ACTs are managed by a multidisciplinary team (social workers, nurses, a doctor, and a psychologist), including a peer worker. The peer worker worker fully participates in the team's work and describes her role as integrated: she had access to everything from the beginning and participates in all team meetings, without any formal distinction between peer worker support workers and social workers in the sharing of information. She uses the same tracking and information-sharing software and is part of the professional WhatsApp group.

> “From the beginning, I had access to everything. Having access to everything helped me a lot, to feel legitimate in the eyes of my colleagues but also to better understand, to get information... About shared secrets, for example... I didn’t do any training, I learned on the job, because we talk about it all the time.” (Interview with a peer worker)

> “We have a professional WhatsApp group, we send each other information. Then we decided not to write people’s names as a precaution, and I. is in the group, follows the discussions about it and she’s learning; she’s hearing about it...” (Interview with a social worker)

However, her role in the distribution of tasks remains unique. The service operates on a "rotating casework" system: pairs of social workers and nurses follow a portion of the active caseload for four months, then the pairs rotate, so that after a year the professionals have worked together and shared best practices. Within this framework, I. is not assigned to a primary casework pair: she works with the pairs during the initial visit, but subsequently she works across departments and may meet with individuals alone or with the team, depending on the needs.

I.'s integration involves very operational methods of cooperation (shared documents, informal exchanges, working in rotating pairs), and a definition of his place which makes him a full member of the team while reserving for him a unique place specific to his function as a peer worker.

Community Hub (“Pôle communautaire”) of Dune (Brussels)

In Dune, the community hub (“Pôle communautaire”) plays a key role in facilitating the participation of service users and consists of three people: a coordinator, a social worker, and a peer worker. The peer worker, like the other two, is responsible for community outreach, but primarily works in collaboration with other teams. Twice a month, they co-facilitate a citizen committee of service users with a colleague from the psycho-social team, following an inter-team liaison approach.

In parallel, he also conducts individual interviews, when requested by the team or the individuals he serves. These interviews are less about formalized follow-up and more about providing occasional support "as needed." Most often, he intervenes at the suggestion of a colleague – "go talk to P." – when a substance use-related difficulty arises or when someone needs specific support. He indicates that these interviews frequently focus on emotions, setbacks, relapses, shame, or even withdrawal – "how did you do it, how can I do it?" However, he states that he does not perform the same work as social workers, as he does not handle administrative procedures.

He is therefore responsible for community outreach, just like his colleagues in the community unit, but he also carries out other tasks to support the social work of social workers. In both cases, his role is designed to allow him to draw on his experiential knowledge through direct contact with beneficiaries.

Once again, we find a horizontal structure, but one that includes the identification of specific missions. The peer worker is part of a team with which it shares missions (co-facilitation of workshops), but while respecting its specific role (occasional intervention on topics allowing it to mobilize its experiential knowledge).

Trend 2 ---> The creation of a fully-fledged peer-work service: articulation as a condition for interprofessional cooperation and the definition of professional boundaries (Nidos; SPF Brussels)

The ICM Department in Nidos (Netherlands)

Nidos is an independent organisation in the Netherlands responsible for the guardianship of unaccompanied minors (UAMs) and for organising their placement in foster families and small-scale residential care facilities (the latter once they have obtained a residence permit). As a certified child protection organisation entrusted with a public mandate, Nidos exercises legal guardianship over these children.

For several years, the structure of a specialized InterCultural Mediation Department has supported guardians in their work with young people and in the educational relationship. Nidos' unique approach lies in having institutionalized a form of peer support through a dedicated service, integrated into the guardianship mandate for unaccompanied minors. The choice of a fully-fledged intercultural mediation service addresses the need to mobilize linguistic and intercultural mediation skills to facilitate building relationships and mutual understanding between the young people being supported and the professionals, as well as the importance of clearly distinguishing professional boundaries. Guardians expressed recurring concerns at the program's inception.

As we have already mentioned, the arrival of a new professional can be perceived as implicit competition, with the fear that the mediator will partially take the place of the guardian, who might then lose control of the educational relationship (the fear that the young person will primarily attach to the mediator or directly seek the mediator's help to the detriment of the guardian) and, above all, of responsibility. Indeed, even if the Inter-Cultural Mediation Dept is designed as a support, the guardian remains legally and professionally responsible. Increased vigilance is implemented to ensure that the mediator's role does not overlap with that of the guardian.

The creation of a dedicated service makes it possible to organize coordination as a practical condition for inter-professional cooperation.

This explains why Nidos has built and progressively strengthened an intervention framework that secures each stage in order to prevent tensions and make cooperation between professionals predictable: the mediators' intervention is initiated by the guardian and follows a pre-established process over a limited timeframe. Furthermore, permanent regulatory and support mechanisms are in place through structured coordination, and a mediator team leader supports the mediators in complex situations and intervenes in the event of tensions with the guardians. This system protects the responsibility of the guardians and the specific role of the mediators.

The exchanges show, however, that even in this stabilized framework, integration remains a relational task: articulation and cooperation are possible when the role of mediators is recognized and they are sought out as resource colleagues - "colleagues ask for my intervention... come to see me... you can advise me" - and when role misunderstandings are addressed as professional issues through continuous training with the teams.

The "Experts by Experience" (“Experts du vécu”) service of the SPP (Federal public service) Social Intégration (Brussels)

The "Experts by Experience" service of the SPP Social Integration in Brussels represents a particularly institutionalized form of mobilizing experiential knowledge in public action. Since the early 2000s, this service has recruited individuals who have directly experienced poverty or social exclusion and who have been able to transform this experience into professional expertise capable of identifying obstacles to accessing rights and public services that organizations often fail to perceive from within.

As with Nidos, this is a fully-fledged service consisting of a coordination team and 43 experts by experience seconded to various public services (an expert is permanently associated with an institution through a partnership).

The specificity of the SPP is to aim for action oriented towards the transformation of services: "we do not go to people but to institutions" with whom the service develops partnerships.

A prime example: the expert by experience seconded to the CAAMI (Auxiliary Sickness and Disability Insurance Fund)

J., an expert by experience attached to the SPP and seconded to the CAAMI, clearly illustrates the unique role played by these professionals who are part of a team but whose work is carried out within partner institutions to help them identify the obstacles and needs of the people concerned, improve the accessibility of the services offered, and conduct awareness-raising and advocacy activities. In concrete terms, lived experience expertise operates on three levels:

On the front line (contact with citizens) to identify, from the ground up, the concrete obstacles to accessing rights/care (understanding administrative language, difficulties with correspondence, lack of awareness of services, non-recourse, etc.),

1. In the second line (working with the partner institution) to bring forward the identified needs and improve procedures, communication, accessibility, etc.
2. At a cross-cutting level (third line type) to raise awareness and conduct advocacy actions with institutions in the broadest sense.
3. During the discussions, J. clarified his position: "I am alongside the person," and described how his presence can change the way a situation is received at the service counters. This is a delicate position because the expert by experience occupies a place that is both close to the ground and oriented towards institutional change, which requires ongoing communication. Staff may fear a form of control or judgment, so the service must make it clear that the expert by experience "does not replace the social worker and does not evaluate their work" but contributes to thinking about "how to improve support" and access to rights. This requires regular dialogue with professionals.

In conclusion, both cases illustrate an organizational model of peer work in the form of a clearly defined service, with an explicit mandate, coordination mechanisms, and rules governing its interaction with other professionals/services. This structure allows for a clear definition of roles and responsibilities (who does what), while requiring ongoing professional development for staff and regulatory and support mechanisms.

Defining the place of a peer worker is directly linked to defining their role and missions, which we will examine in more detail in the following section.

III - MISSIONS AND ACTIVITIES OF THE PEER WORKER

A central obstacle, constantly found in the literature, is the ambiguity of the missions and the difficulty in defining the role of the peer worker: what exactly does he/she do? What distinguishes his/her missions from those of a mediator, an educator, a psycho-social interventionist?

Studies document recurring tensions surrounding the delimitation of the scope (who does what), the formalization of the peer worker's activities and missions, the management of expectations (of users, teams, and institutions), and boundary issues (proximity/distance, friendship/support, confidentiality). This difficulty in typology stems primarily from the challenges posed by the recognition and mobilization of experiential knowledge. Without clarifying this concept and analyzing the concrete ways in which experiential knowledge is applied in practice, it will not be possible to define the missions and activities of peer workers and, consequently, to establish it as a profession in its own right. Hence the risk of reducing peer work to a peripheral, subordinate, or instrumental function. In order to define the peer worker's skills and identify what they bring that is different and/or complementary to social workers, it is first necessary to clarify what experiential knowledge is. To do this, we rely on the scientific literature and interviews with experts:

Stéphane Waha, peer worker and trainer, Funambule/SMES, Brussels

France Dujardin, peer workers training coordinator, University of Mons

Eve Gardien, Associated professor, University of Rennes 2

Baptiste Godie, Professor, University of Montreal

"Experiential knowledge": what are we talking about?

"Experiential knowledge" is not limited to lived experience or simple testimony: it refers to knowledge, produced from lived experience considered rare or atypical (for example chronic illness, disability, addiction, exile, precariousness, etc.), which becomes operational through a process of reflexivity and semantization.

The goal is therefore to transform experience into knowledge.

According to Eve Gardien (2019; 2025), the concept of "experiential knowledge" goes beyond lived experience, referring to what is produced from lived experience when that experience is given meaning and significance through words. The researcher speaks of:

A "semanticized experience" that can lead to new ways of doing and thinking.

The objective is effectiveness in situation - in other words, the ability to orient oneself, understand and act in daily life - rather than the search for an objective truth in the scientific sense.
This knowledge gains robustness when it is shared, discussed, and validated among peers, allowing it to be recognized as action-oriented intersubjective knowledge. According to Emmanuelle Cartron, Sandrine Lefebvre, and Ljiljana Jovic (2021), individual experience becomes practical knowledge and then "knowledge" through sharing within a group, which allows for a shift from "it works for me" to "it makes sense for others." In this context, we move beyond subjectivity (often criticized in experiential knowledge) to affirm the intersubjectivity that arises from sharing within a peer group and that authorizes the use of the term "knowledge" because it is verbalized, recognized, and transferable.

The research of Cartron, Lefebvre and Jovic also shows how knowledge of the order of individual experience, and therefore situated and not generalizable, can become robust knowledge via a process which starts from experience and leads to active experimentation, passing through reflection and the development of concepts and principles.

The intersubjectivity of peer groups supports the recognition and transferability of an experience which thus becomes expertise once it is removed from individual experience.

In this sense, self-narration is not a simple testimony but constitutes an important modality of making sense of and gaining recognition from others for rare experiences.
Gildas Bregain (2025) illustrates how explicit narrative can serve as a means of transmission and not just as testimony.

It is therefore important, on the one hand, not to reduce experiential knowledge to testimony but to recognize it as a resource for support and, on the other hand, not to essentialize it by assuming that all the people concerned have this knowledge and are able to mobilize it.

However, when integrating a peer worker into an institution, the challenge is to identify missions and design activities where their experiential knowledge is recognized as expertise, their experience can be translated into skills and their role can be articulated with professional knowledge.

The challenges are therefore both epistemic and organizational:
recognizing experiential knowledge as knowledge, but also identifying the ways in which it is translated into action, how it is implemented.

From experiential knowledge to professional know-how: defining the skills of the peer workers

Drawing on lived experience is not automatic; it requires relational skills, reflexivity, and the ability to transform a personal narrative into a useful resource for others. How can we move from lived experience to professional knowledge? How do we define the skills of a professional practice? What does it offer that is different from and/or complementary to traditional teaching methods? When and how does experiential knowledge become expertise, that is, an institutionalized resource mobilized for the benefit of others?

The recognition of expertise translates into clearly identified missions and functions which signal that experience is no longer just lived experience but a recognized function, with expectations.

→ **Role of the peer workers:** The peer worker is therefore a professional capable of transforming lived experience into resources for action, and of helping the team to understand the obstacles and solutions invisible from the "outside", that is to say outside the "peer" relationship.

How does this process work?

Throughout the discussions held during the interviews and study visits, questions about the peer worker's "skills" and their contribution to social work frequently arose and encountered a recurring difficulty:

The effects of peer work are frequently observable, but they remain difficult to describe, formalize, and objectify in terms of operational expectations.

We can see that "it works", but putting precise words to the "how" - and to what constitutes a skill - remains complex.

In this respect, the results of the discussions can be summarized in three points as follows:

What do we expect from peer work?

In discussions, the peer worker is initially conceived as a functional resource to support the process. A set of expectations, often very pragmatic, is identified:

- Improving the quality of support (adherence, understanding, continuity)
- Accelerating certain stages of the process (establishing contact, mobilization, getting things moving again)
- Resolving difficult situations (withdrawal, mistrust, breakups, relationship deadlocks)
- Building connections and facilitating relationships (defusing tension, translating, reassuring, re-establishing dialogue)
- Reaching out to the least accessible audiences

From this perspective, the contribution of peer worker is less an additional “technique” than an ability to make possible what otherwise remains fragile: encounter, trust, long-term commitment, understanding of people’s needs and difficulties.

How can we define the Peer Worker?

When it comes to describing the peer worker, the partners readily resort to metaphors that clearly illustrate the relational dimension of the role:

bridge, mediator, facilitator, giver of hope.

These images converge on a central idea: the peer worker occupies a position of “third party,” capable of connecting different worlds that sometimes communicate poorly (personal experience and the institution; the individual and the service; etc.). However, it is not simply a matter of “making connections,” but also of creating the conditions for transition: transition to speaking, to making a request, to taking action, to building trust, to accepting help...

What are the skills of a peer worker?

Participants in study visits often cite:

Listening, empathy, adaptability, mediation, non-judgment, optimism, tenacity...

It is important to clarify that we are not talking here about "natural qualities" but about genuine professional ways of acting, situated skills mobilized in action and producing effects: bringing to light what is not said and what is often not said to social workers; making situations and attitudes translatable and understandable; maintaining the relationship despite possible ruptures and tensions (not giving up)...

This distinction is crucial to avoid two pitfalls: naturalization – “he/she is like that” – and deprofessionalization – “it’s just a relationship”.

The elusive nature of peer work, or how to name and make visible the professional mechanisms at play...

A striking point is how several partners talk about a dimension that is difficult to capture:

"I like to talk about invisible connections."

"We can't explain it, but something powerful is happening."

"It works, but we don't know why."

"We've observed that when they exchange ideas with their peers, it works better."

We speak of an invisible, elusive link because a large part of what makes peer work valuable does not stem from a "technique" already recognized as specific to a classic profession, but from a relational effect that is woven between two people, in a given context and which is used intentionally, according to the needs.

Thus, the invisible bond can be described as an ability to generate trust and commitment where ordinary forms of support would take longer or reach their limits.

As this excerpt from an interview with a social worker shows:

> “I. has an advantage of proximity that we lack because we are caught up in our administrative and medical procedures, whereas she has a closeness with the users that we struggle to achieve. (...) Often, people have difficulty opening up to the social worker; they give us embellished stories. Isabelle facilitates the connection, allowing us to hear the real story, not the fabricated one. Some users know social services better than we do and have highly rehearsed narratives. I. helps us understand situations beyond these rehearsed and embellished accounts.” (Interview with a social worker, Fondation de Nice)

In the statements of both peer workers and social workers, it is not uncommon to observe a separation between the administrative and relational aspects of their work. On one hand, the peer workers interviewed feel that administrative tasks fall neither within their responsibilities nor their skills, and they perceive themselves as primarily engaged in a role of proximity, listening, and relationship-building. On the other hand, social workers report being increasingly constrained by the rise of administrative duties, often at the expense of relational work, even though the latter has historically been at the core of their profession. These narratives highlight the risk of a segmentation of roles, in which peer workers are assigned to “relationship work” while social workers are relegated to “administrative tasks,” potentially resulting in a loss of meaning for the latter.

While the increasing burden of administrative tasks represents a significant development in contemporary social work, it is important to emphasize that the relational dimension mobilized in peer work is of a different nature:

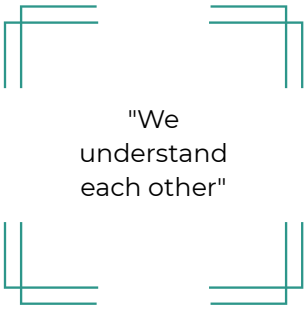
Based on experiential knowledge, it does not replace the supportive relationship inherent to social work, but rather complements it according to a logic of complementarity.

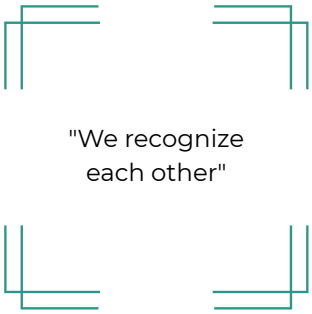
The strength of peer work lies in know-how that is often invisible, in relational micro-processes that are difficult to capture by the usual evaluation frameworks (such as monitoring tables, procedures, indicators).

*The relational aspect is therefore the essence of peer work and differs from the relational aspect built by social workers because it is based on shared and recognizable experiences between peers. It is within this "pairité" * that peer work produces visible effects on support.*

The effects of “pairité”* or peer recognition

A form of recognition develops in the relationship between peers, allowing the individual to feel understood from within, without having to justify everything. This peer relationship creates a space where the other person is allowed to speak freely, to share their story, where certain things become speakable because they are less subject to feelings of shame and stigmatization. We can speak of a kind of chemistry of recognition.





This sharing and mutual recognition produce concrete effects in terms of trust, access to care and support, networking, and consequently, facilitating the work of colleagues. Peer work helps to highlight obstacles, needs, and opportunities that sometimes remain hidden from those outside the peer group. It captures unspoken needs and non-verbal cues.

> “What was striking was the peer worker’s sensitivity in identifying the family’s needs despite the language barrier. The family being supported spoke neither French nor English. It’s surprising that, despite the difficulty of communication, some rather intense moments occurred. The family seemed relieved to finally have a housing solution, but a certain weariness was also evident. (...) The peer worker sensed that the woman wasn’t receptive because she was hungry. The family hadn’t eaten since the morning, which F. understood, and she then took them to the grocery store.”
> (Extract from the report of the visit to the DA Asylum, Fondation de Nice, Nice)

**The sociologist Eve Gardien can be credited with a central role in the conceptualization of the notion of “pairité” in contemporary literature on peer support. See in particular: Gardien, E. (2020), “Pairjectivité : des savoirs expérientiels ni objectifs, ni subjectifs,” Éducation et socialisation, Les Cahiers du CERFEE, 57.*

The added value of the peer work lies in its intangible contributions (trust, hope, relational security) and stems from an ability to interpret and translate lived experience, which becomes a direct support for the guidance provided. Hence the use of expressions such as "bridge," "transfer between worlds," "facilitator," "translator between two worlds," "mediators between cultures," signifying the connection between the individual and the institution, between lived experience and professional categories, between personal experience and administrative expectations.

> “By acting as cultural intermediaries and advisors to guardians, families and professionals, intercultural mediators enable better communication and help to turn guardian/unaccompanied minor conflicts into opportunities for mutual understanding.”
> (Excerpt from the report of the study visit to Nidos, Utrecht)

The peer worker does more than just create connections; they restore meaning, provide context, create translations, reduce misunderstandings, and help facilitate the relationship for both parties. In short, they make the institution understandable to the individual and the lived experience understandable to the institution.

Skills that are situated and co-produced, but intentional and can be mobilized as needed.

These skills are situated and co-produced within the relationship between two people: hence the difficulty in objectifying them. The often-described elusive or invisible nature of these skills is not a lack of professionalism or an impossibility of objectifying and formalizing them, but rather indicates that the peer worker's skills are situated (within the relationship), specific to a context (peerhood), and partly co-produced within the interaction.

Much happens informally: over coffee, during a break, on a walk. This isn't about "spontaneity." On the contrary, informal interactions require skill and reflection on how relationships are used as a working tool.
The use of informal relationship and support codes is therefore not "natural" but deliberate and results from an understanding and mastery of their effects. The peer worker uses them intentionally. For example:

> “You have to know when to tell your story, when it’s useful. Sometimes you need to share a part of it, but not start spilling everything. It’s really about managing your life story. That’s the most important thing. In fact, when a client comes to me and talks about a very specific problem, I can use my own experience to try to connect with what they’re telling me. But it has to be very sparing. If I start going on and on, then I’m the one having the interview, not them.” (Excerpt from an interview with a peer worker, Réseau Nomade, Brussels)

This is a real skill, which requires building a "presence" alongside the people being supported while avoiding over-investment, and paying attention to the management of emotions.

Right distance versus right presence

Indeed, the peer relationship is not automatic; it is built by the peer worker and triggered by a specific approach based on a certain closeness that should be valued, even though it is often criticized in social work (which tends to emphasize maintaining appropriate distance as best practice). Yet, horizontality and a reduction of symmetry in the relationship with the people being supported are key elements of the peer relationship and allow for the creation of a more direct and less formalized connection that fosters engagement in the support process. Unlike social workers, peer workers often tend to use the French "tu" (unformal “you”) form with the people they support, share more intimate moments of their daily lives, step outside the institutional framework, and remove physical barriers (office, screen, etc.). The emotional dimension is therefore important in the relationship, and managing emotions is a skill specific to peer workers.

Because of this, all participants highlighted the risks of overinvestment, adopting a “savior” posture, difficulties in maintaining boundaries, etc., and emphasized the importance for peer workers to have clear reference points in case of need, with designated persons to turn to depending on the situation. Attention to well-being, emotional regulation, and access to support spaces were identified as essential, given the emotional load of the work (Nidos/Réseau Nomade).

Creating and accessing peer support and sharing spaces

The importance of creating spaces for peer-to-peer sharing—not only within a single organization but also, and especially, in independent peer work bodies outside any employing institution—was widely emphasized during the various discussions. In this sense, the actions of the **Forum Bruxelles contre les inégalités** are particularly inspiring. Peer supervision, open peer-support meetings, and similar practices are relevant tools, distinct from organizational or hierarchical supervision. A focus on these practices is presented in Section V of this deliverable, as they are directly linked to the question of legitimizing peer work. These spaces also serve to promote skill development and strengthen individuals’ empowerment.

The peer worker's toolkit

- Personal experience: knowing how to share your story when it's relevant (without exposing yourself).
- Using first names and building rapport (while managing emotions and adjusting the level of closeness).
- Relational tools.
- The gateway to trust.
- Mediation tools.

To conclude

These results dispel the main fear of social workers because they indicate that peer support is not intended to replace social workers: it operates in a complementary way, centered on peer support as a framework for intervention and as a resource for engaging, re-engaging, and supporting self-determination. The added value of peer worker support is therefore contingent upon a clear articulation of roles: peer support provides another relational perspective and an internal understanding of lived experience, which social work can integrate to tailor interventions.

IV - TRAINING

During meetings and interviews with peer worker, their employers, or experts, the issue of peer support worker training is frequently raised. Initial training, ongoing training, and training for the teams hosting peer workers are specifically mentioned.
Regarding peer support, initial training programs are proliferating, particularly in the field of mental health. Some are more general, combining the fields of health, social work, and disability, as is the case at the University of Rennes 2 under the direction of Eve Gardien. Despite this proliferation of new training programs, those specifically targeting (future) peer workers in the social sector remain limited.

Those interviewed agreed that while training is not required to practice, it remains a valuable tool and support for strengthening their ability to guide and integrate into professional teams. In particular, we noted that these training programs build, if not consolidate, skills and knowledge related to teamwork and the use of digital tools. They also allow trainees to reflect on, question, and analyze their personal journeys, notably through narrative.

The various exchanges with peer workers also highlighted the need for continuing professional development. Named differently depending on the country and institution—such as “professional practice analysis,” “intervision,” or “discussion groups”—these sessions provide “bubbles” within the work environment, allowing peer workers to exchange ideas and advice based on concrete situations or chosen themes. These sessions can be facilitated by a peer worker or an external facilitator trained in this type of intervention.

Among the participants in the European project and their partners, some have training programs already in place, while others are planning a program.

In initial training

The University of Mons (Belgium) offers a year-long training program, with one day of classes per week, and includes 200 hours of mandatory internship. There are no prerequisites, but selection is made by a jury that forms a group of 20 participants. The program is structured around four main components: self-reflection and interpersonal skills, the acquisition of social, psychological, medical, and medico-social concepts, professional experience and the development of a professional skills toolkit, and research (optional). Upon completion of the program, a certificate of participation is issued by the University of Mons.
A., who has completed this training, presents its advantages and notes that the work of narrating his journey has allowed him, in particular, to take a step back, to distance himself from his story and to give it meaning.

The ICM Department of Nidos provides a combined mediation and interpreting service, with an emphasis on cultural translation rather than literal interpretation. As such, mediators are trained in cultural and migration backgrounds, as well as intercultural and linguistic mediation.

HETIS is developing a training program specifically for peer workers in the social sector, building on initial work documenting peer work at the Fondation de Nice and incorporating insights gained from study visits. The main themes are outlined below. The first phase of implementation is scheduled for September 2026. The program will focus on narrative work and social work tools (professional communication, digital tools, and role-playing exercises).

Continuing education

In a more or less extensive and regular manner, all partners implement times for exchanges, discussion groups, intervisions, and analyses of practices between peer workers, allowing them to question professional practices, exchange support tools, reflect on their posture, and also on ways to protect themselves.

Nidos regularly offers peer supervision sessions as a cornerstone of professional support. These sessions are designed to foster reflection, collective learning, and well-being. During the study visit to Utrecht, participants observed a case study and the methodology used to address it. Following a presentation by a facilitator, three steps were carried out:

- Questions are asked by peers to clarify the situation;
- Advice without judgment is offered.
- And finally, the mediator provides reflective feedback.

As we can see, peer supervision is conceived here as a safe space, structuring reflection, governed by clear rules and dedicated time for guidance. Supervision sessions, focused on organizational or hierarchical support, are also implemented. These two support spaces have been identified as essential for managing the emotional burden that these support activities can generate.

At the **Fondation de Nice**, times dedicated exclusively to peer workers are designed as spaces without hierarchy to strengthen collective identity, trust and support among peers.

The open peer support meetings organized by the **Plateforme Bruxelloise pour la Santé Mentale** (“Brussels Platform for Mental Health”) provide a space for dialogue, resource sharing, and support for peer workers, experts by experience, and professionals and individuals trained in peer support, allowing them to share their professional experiences. At the meeting focusing on the theme of drawing on lived experience, for example, each participant shared their techniques and insights for identifying the appropriate moment to draw upon it.

These informal exchanges, which provide support and collective reflection, also serve as an entry point into the profession and can constitute a first foray into peer support: "People gather information," "introduce themselves" to others more experienced, "share their background and desire to get involved in peer support," or even to enroll in training. At one of the open meetings on peer support, two people introduced themselves to the group, expressing their interest in the field.

Continuing education needs

As we have already noted, initial training in peer support is not a requirement to practice. However, to mitigate or overcome certain difficulties that peer workers may encounter, offering short training modules in addition to initial training could address individual needs, provide protection, and equip them with tools for professional integration. The mobilization of lived experience, which peer workers often learn on the job without fully understanding many of the issues at the outset, can present a challenge in terms of its repercussions (what are the implications for me, for the other person, of what I disclose? How do I identify the right moment?). Furthermore, teamwork requires, at a minimum, mastery of written communication, digital tools, and a shared professional vocabulary.

Team training:

Training in peer work and facilitating the integration of a peer worker into a team sometimes become intertwined. In Brussels, the support provided by the **SMES Pat project** also contributes to training and preparing teams that will welcome a peer worker. At the **Fondation de Nice**, the screening of a film showcasing peer worker within the foundation raises awareness of peer work among new employees.
At the **University of Mons in Belgium**, team training is disseminated through territorial network days that bring together stakeholders from the social and health sectors and systematically include peer workers. This training also extends to the teaching staff. The collaborative work undertaken by peer workers and specialists in a given field (e.g., an addiction specialist) to prepare their interventions fosters interaction. This approach encourages peers to identify each other's knowledge and implicitly contributes to recognizing the value of experiential learning.

The needs identified from discussions regarding the initial training of peer workers

In light of the various initiatives and difficulties identified, some guidelines are emerging for developing initial training for peer workers specific to social work:
Regarding admission requirements, no prerequisites (diploma, etc.) other than experiential knowledge are necessary for entry into the training program. However, placement interviews can be conducted to discuss and identify any difficulties that may require support or adjustments during the training period.

A training program based on the principle of alternating work and study, combining practical experience (internship or employment) over a period of 5 months at a rate of one to two days per week.
Training validated by open badges/microcrdentials, which attest to the acquisition of skills and professional know-how, gives credibility to the function, both to trainees and to the structures and institutions that integrate peer work into their support.

Regarding its organization: the training is structured around 3 main modules covering the institutional environment and social professions, support and relational skills, technical skills and teamwork, these modules addressing content enabling the acquisition as well as the strengthening of basic / key skills (digital, writing, etc.), knowledge of the social sector.

Following our discussions and reflections, certain content or methodologies appear essential:
Support is provided for analyzing one's career path and narrative, specifically for peer work in the social sector. One approach to reflecting on one's journey, giving meaning to one's story, and examining and managing the effects of its mobilization can be achieved through a biographical approach, both in its writing and in the reflections it evokes (motivations and issues surrounding the mobilization of lived experience). Supported by theoretical and/or conceptual contributions, the journey can be analyzed from a social and collective perspective (e.g., precariousness, migration, etc.).

- time for reflection and work on distance and professional involvement, such as practice analyses and situation studies.
- support during the internship, time within the training combining practice and theory.
- instances allowing knowledge of the intervention area, carried out from research work or in connection with experience.
- Experiments with group facilitation methodologies (discussion groups and others) and mediation tools (surveying, world café, etc.) will be conducted to encourage initiatives and facilitate networking, advocacy development, and group activities for individuals receiving support or for a peer support network. This experimentation may be incorporated into the training program through the completion of a project that contributes to understanding the specific nature of peer support within social work.

Regarding the teaching staff:

The availability of the permanent teaching team, who will have been previously trained in peer work, is crucial. This new training program may challenge established social work practices and, more generally, the expectations of candidates entering training (currently, personal experience is not valued in applications).

Forming a group of stakeholders based on their specialty and profile includes peer workers and stakeholders with a more traditional profile.

One of the first tasks for the team is to establish an initial inventory of the peer workers' skills and to associate training expectations with them.

V - BUILDING THE LEGITIMACY OF PEER WORK IN THE SOCIAL FIELD

As mentioned in the Introduction, while peer support in the healthcare sector has established itself, gained recognition, and achieved a degree of legitimacy, this is far less the case in social work, where peer support is much less developed. In Brussels, where the boundaries between healthcare and social services are much more blurred, many peer workers operate within organizations that operate within both the health and social sectors, supporting individuals facing intersecting challenges related to mental health, addiction, precarious living conditions, and access to housing. The integration of peer workers into social work organizations is not straightforward, but it is nonetheless generating increasing interest from these organizations. Our discussions have revealed that initiatives are emerging to demonstrate the value of peer support and to establish its legitimacy.

This is particularly true of the **Fondaton de Nice**, which, at the start of the study visit to Nice, screened video portraits showcasing peer support work within the institution. These videos are shown to new employees and have also served as presentation materials when the Foundation was invited by the University of Nîmes to discuss peer support work. This outreach also took the form of a career presentation for students enrolled in special education training at HETIS.

In Brussels, where we delve into the field at the intersection of health and social services, study visits, expert hearings, and discussions reveal an organization for raising the profile of peer work on various fronts, which appears to be actively promoting its visibility. We observe significant networking efforts that contribute, in the short and long term, to a greater understanding of peer work.

Thus, at the **University of Mons** (Belgium), as France Dujardin explains in her interview, the development and implementation of peer support training also serves as a pretext for legitimizing peer work and demonstrating its value. Initiatives are multiplying in this direction and working together to build recognition. For example, internships during the training program are gaining access to new, qualifying placements. Interventions and courses conducted in pairs (peer worker/specialized external facilitator) "require" participants to get to know each other and establish contact to work together. Similarly, the organization of roundtables, thematic days, and conferences that connect peer support workers with other professionals contributes to increased external visibility. In the longer term, the university is investing in research and supporting students working on this topic. It is also integrating experiential knowledge into research and offering research projects to volunteers as part of the peer support training program.

The **Forum Bruxelles contre les inégalités**, which raises public and political awareness about new forms of precariousness, also contributes through its operations and missions to giving weight and value to the voices of people affected by precariousness. On the one hand, the Forum Bruxelles contre les inégalités develops projects and recommendations that bring together professional expertise, the knowledge of people experiencing poverty, and academic and political perspectives on social issues.
Furthermore, these voices are represented within the team through positions of "experts by experience," who operate at the tertiary level and whose responsibilities—such as advocacy work and public speaking—help make their contributions visible and ensure public recognition. One of these experts, participating in study visits, explains that one of his tasks is to facilitate a network of lived-experience experts to build a shared voice on issues related to public policy, such as poverty, addiction, and mental health. This collective voice, constructed from the multiple lived experiences gathered, forms the basis of advocacy efforts, reflecting the sensitivities and realities of living in situations of precariousness.

> At the Federal Public Service level, Marco Willems, the SPP's expert by experience ("**Expert du vécu**"), is developing lobbying and awareness-raising activities with institutions to promote and legitimize peer support and to bring to light the needs and difficulties faced by the public. The objective is to generate positive dynamics for the transformation and improvement of services and to meet the real needs of individuals based on the observations made by experts in the field.

From initiatives in Brussels, we can conclude that working more closely together in our respective fields would not only promote the recognition of peer work within social work structures but also further embed it within the sector. This is precisely what we are initiating through this European project and the discussions it is generating, the emerging training programs, and the upcoming seminar. Following this shared experience, which will contribute to demystifying the profession, a thoughtful, long-term effort will be undertaken to engage institutions wishing to increase the visibility of the profession and its role.

Based on the study visits, the identified initiatives (and their target audiences) bring peer support into the spotlight. This identification allows for a concerted deployment effort to gain greater visibility than initiatives implemented in isolation. The European project is initiating initial visibility with its seminar scheduled for the end of January 2027, and gaining recognition through the development of training programs for peer support workers, certifying key skills specific to social work. Furthermore, we can highlight other initiatives that enhance its legitimacy, such as:

- Publication of articles in social work journals reporting on the role and missions of peer workers in support or on innovative initiatives involving peer worker authors, specialists, and professionals
- For future social workers: propose an intervention within training programs (particularly state-recognized diploma programs, including management training)
- Creation of job descriptions to communicate with employment advisors
- Co-construction of a skills/professional framework for peer work in social work, by conducting an identification of the specificities of the profession in this field.

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