

## PEER LINKS HISTORY



**T**he seed for the Peer Links program first germinated at CAYR Community Connections in 2017 while the agency was in the process of adopting the strengths-based Sustainable Livelihoods (SL) framework of program and service delivery. Our partners at Eko Nomos who helped us formally embed the SL framework at all levels of CAYR, held extensive consultations with our service users during this process. A key recommendation coming out of these consultations was that many of our current and long-time service users were eager to engage with the agency in the capacity of paid peer staff and mentors/leaders.

There was ample evidence from within Ontario's HIV/AIDS sector demonstrating the positive health and wellness outcomes of peer support for people living with HIV/AIDS. Ontario's AIDS Service Organizations (ASOs) have formally committed to the principle of GIPA/MIPA, the Greater — and Meaningful — Involvement of

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People living with HIV/AIDS. As such, there were ample role models in the sector of people with lived experience engaging in peer mentorship and leadership roles as advisors, counselors, educators, facilitators, advocates, helpers, and navigators.

In the course of integrating the Rainbow Spaces (formerly My House Rainbow Resources of York Region) program at CAYR, we became acquainted with research as well as model programs in Toronto and Simcoe-Muskoka that showed the positive impacts of peer-to-peer and intergenerational mentoring opportunities for 2SLGBTQ+ youth and seniors.

We also learned about the Telephone Reassurance, Virtual Visiting Programs, and the Digital Storytelling Initiative of our community partner CHATS (Community & Home Assistance to Seniors), which helped with social engagement for isolated seniors using a volunteered peer mentorship and peer-to-peer service delivery model.

Another core community partner agency, Krasman Centre, acquainted us with their PeerZone facilitator's program that helps people with lived experience gain a better understanding of themselves, explore their own stories, address self-stigma, find their own voices, and

build their resilience as peer workers, volunteers, and community members.

It became increasingly clear to us that peer-to-peer and intergenerational programs can help our service users reduce their social isolation and its associated vulnerabilities by fostering a sense of belonging, stronger social connections, community history, and increased community involvement. There was also a keen interest among our service users living with HIV/AIDS and/or identifying as 2SLGBTQ+ community members to access training opportunities that could help them build their leadership and volunteering skills.

In 2018 we got an opportunity to secure resources through the Social Inclusion Projects stream of The Regional Municipality of York's 2019–2021 Community Investment Fund. We were successful in receiving funding to undertake a three-year project entitled Peer Links that enabled CAYR to develop intergenerational social inclusion programs for low to moderate income York Region residents impacted by HIV/AIDS and/or identifying as 2SLGBTQ+. We were able to leverage and strengthen our existing partnerships with CHATS and Krasman Centre to initiate the Peer Links program at CAYR and build a trained pool of peer support work-

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ers, peer mentors, and volunteers who are impacted by HIV/AIDS and/or identify as 2SLGBTQ+ community members. Through innovative and creative intergenerational program activities such as Virtual Visiting and Digital Storytelling, our project participants were able to reduce their vulnerability and build a stronger sense of belonging and acceptance through increased social connections.

—Vibhuti Mehra

Executive Director, 2014–2020

— Marie Morton

Executive Director, 2021–