

RECONSIDERING STRICT EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS AND ENSURING THAT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IS ACCESSIBLE

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Potentially unnecessary education requirements and too few pathways to pursue educational opportunities prevent high-quality, impact-driven staff with lived experience of homelessness from fully contributing to the work of ending homelessness.

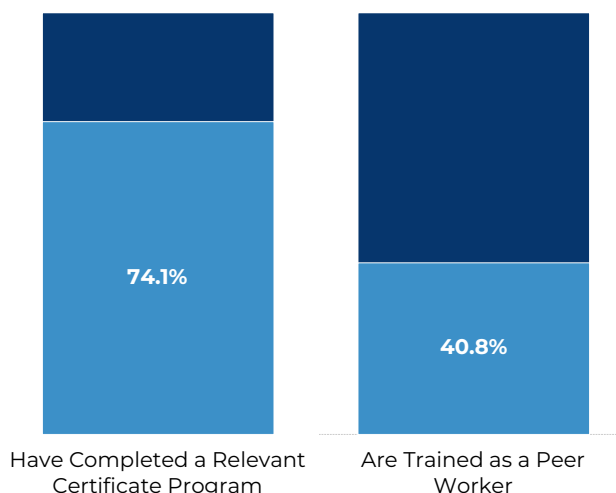
Some lived experience workers responding to an open-ended question on the LEARN Project Survey indicated that strict higher education requirements prevent them from doing meaningful work within the homeless response system. One respondent shared,

“A lot of the job vacancies had a certain education or experience requirement. I would not have been given the opportunity to get this position if it wasn’t for my manager who gave me a chance and now I am thriving in my role.”

This experience is also supported by the survey data. Only **8.4 percent** of PWLE respondents said they have a graduate degree, and **28 percent** of respondents said that it was difficult for them to meet degree requirements when applying for jobs in the response system’s workforce. Meanwhile, close to half said they did not have the necessary work experience. Taken together, PWLE are left wondering how they are supposed to get a foot in the door without paying for expensive degrees.

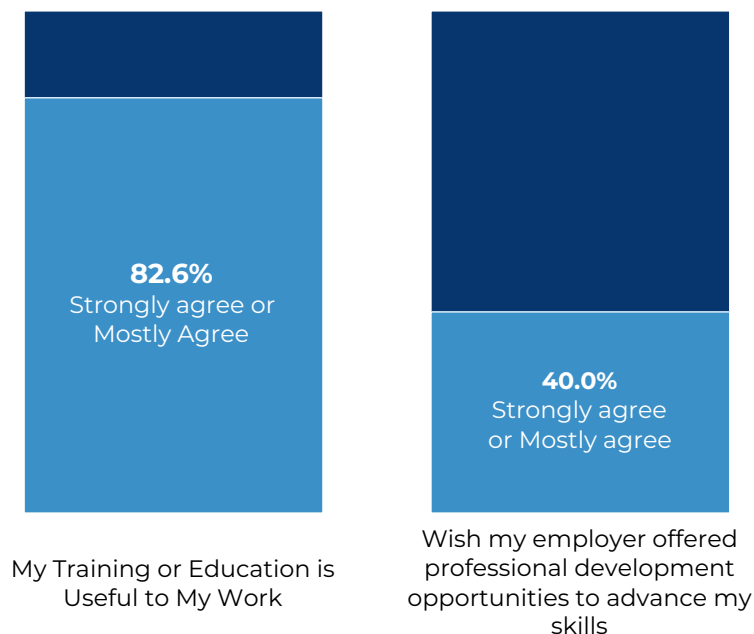
While strict requirements appear to prevent some PWLE from entering and advancing in the workforce, it is also true that many respondents are interested in building their skills through education, training, and professional development. Most have pursued some form of post-secondary education (for example, taking college courses or completing associate degree programs or higher). Most workers said they have completed certificate programs and other less expensive training opportunities that directly leverage their lived experiences (for example, they are trained as peer workers and behavioral health recovery coaches). They largely agree that this education is useful to their work.

SURVEY RESPONDENTS: WORKERS WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF HOMELESSNESS



However, too often, a person's education, training, and lived experiences are not a match for the requirements of a desired job. Further, educational opportunities often require tremendous financial resources and time away from work. This is particularly challenging considering that the majority of PWLE respondents struggle to pay for basic necessities (highlighted in Tatiana Reis' essay, "Low Pay Costs the Homeless Response System Talented Workers"). Without support from their organizations or other sources, PWLE do not have a clear pathway to earn degrees. While the experience of homelessness is a valuable form of expertise that the response system needs to learn from, organizations should also take steps to make roles that do require formal education more accessible by supporting PWLE as they pursue degrees and learn new skills that help them advance their personal and professional goals.

SURVEY RESPONDENTS: WORKERS WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF HOMELESSNESS



In my own experience of surviving homelessness and entering the homelessness services workforce, not having a formal education severely limited my employment opportunities. Hiring managers often assumed I was less skilled than someone with a higher level of education.

This was especially frustrating because some of the most useful knowledge I gained was from my own experience of living through homelessness and navigating the response system as a client. This type of learning was a form of education that cannot be replicated or simulated in a traditional classroom setting because experiencing homelessness is unique and impacts individuals differently based on their identities, life experiences, and context. At the same time, PWLE who can benefit from learning and building skills in a classroom setting should have pathways to do so.

To address these barriers, organizations should consider whether their degree requirements are critical to the roles they are hiring for. Often, degree requirements may prevent people with important skills from making significant contributions to the goal of ending homelessness. If they are not necessary, they should remove these requirements or substitute lived expertise and volunteer work in the homeless response system for education. If the requirements are necessary, they should pay their workers a living wage so that those who would like to expand their skills through education have the resources they need to do so. They should also respond to PWLE workers' desire to improve their work by considering whether additional, on-the-job training or professional development can help build the skills PWLE want and need to be successful.

These changes can help workers use the expertise they gained through experiencing homelessness to do more impactful work. From my experience, the phrase "knowledge is power" rings true. As I learned more about the homeless response system from an inside perspective, I was able to use my experience to have a greater impact. Training helped me be clear and certain about how the system works and how to effectively offer resources to someone in crisis. Furthering my education also helped me build new skills that I could use to help improve services for people experiencing homelessness.

Workers who have experienced homelessness have overcome so much and are still willing to learn, grow, and improve a system that provides life-saving services to people in need. To create the most successful system possible, leaders should acknowledge and encourage this commitment. Doing so will lead to better outcomes for people experiencing homelessness by ensuring that they have access to supportive staff who not only understand the difficulties of experiencing homelessness but also the most productive ways to leverage available resources.

It is essential to note that the homeless response system needs robust funding to provide training and support people with a living wage. These resources should be viewed as a public and private investment: supporting workers with lived experience by removing unnecessary degree requirements and building expertise through training and professional development will lead to a more efficient response system that ensures everyone has a place to call home.