

TURNING OUR VALUES INTO REALITY: HOW TO EMPLOY PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS

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Description of session - What is the topic and what are the objectives of the session?

Without intentionally building out our employment practices in harm reduction aligned fields, people who use drugs end up tokenized, unsupported, and pigeonholed into advisory or frontline roles with low wages and limited opportunities for growth. This session aims to help harm reduction and research employers workshop the policies and practices they need to hire, support and retain employees who use drugs.

The session will move beyond abstract commitments to lived experience and focus on implementation. Attendees will learn how to pragmatically center people who use drugs across all domains of employment, including hiring/onboarding, supervision, workplace culture, professional development and benefits. Examples of discussion topics include setting up spaces for safe use, navigating “Drug Free Workplace” requirements from funders or institutions, and balancing expectations and accommodations when working with people who are experiencing instability. We will explore how to address the real threats of criminalization, liability, funder compliance, and public scrutiny without abandoning our commitments to meaningful inclusion and leadership of people who use drugs.

Objectives include providing attendees with concrete models of workplaces that successfully hire and support people who use drugs and equipping them with adaptable policies and employment practices.

How will the session encourage debate and idea sharing

This session will encourage debate and idea sharing by naming a tension many organizations feel but might not explore openly. While many value centering people who use drugs, dominant anti-drug narratives still shape our assumptions about professionalism, productivity and risk. Through facilitated discussion and shared models, participants will expand their imagination of what workplaces can look like.

How will the session meet the aims of the conference / align with the conference themes?

This session aligns with conference themes by centering people with living experience as experts in harm reduction and healthcare. As drug trends shift, high-quality services depend on leadership and staff drawn from communities most directly affected.

Speakers/Facilitators

Sarah Whipple is the Community Engagement Co-Director of Yuba Harm Reduction Collective, a worker-led syringe service program serving rural Northern California. She is on the Steering Committee of the California Syringe Exchange Programs Network and co-founded a national network for worker led harm reduction programs. She was a 2024 recipient of the Jude Byrne Emerging Female Leader Award.

Alexandra White is the Director of Services at Texas Harm Reduction Alliance. They have helped build harm reduction efforts in various housing, outreach and mutual aid settings in a U.S. state that

criminalizes this work. They co-authored *Nothing About Us Without Us: Building Workplaces By & For People Who Use Drugs*, a toolkit on sustainable and meaningful employment of PWUD.

Ernesto Cortes is a social anthropologist with a Master's degrees in Mental Health and Criminology. He is the Executive Director of the Costa Rican Association on Drug Studies and Interventions, Secretariat of the Latin American Network of People Who Use Drugs, and Board Member of the International Network of People Who Use Drugs and the International Network on Health and Hepatitis in Substance Users.

Sione Crawford has been working in drug user organisations in Australia for over two decades and has worked in peer roles this whole time, including community development, peer education, policy work, and management. He has spoken, written and presented in a variety of forums, including INHSU three peer-based organisations. Sione is currently the CEO of Harm Reduction Victoria in Australia.

Dr. Annie Madden is a Program Lead for the International Network of People Who Use Drugs and co-founder of Harm Reduction Australia. Working on the UNITAID CAB project, she has trained people who use drugs across multiple countries to do values and preferences research. She has decades of experience representing people who use drugs in high level government meetings.

Amanda Slaunwhite is an Assistant Professor in the School of Population and Public Health at the University of British Columbia and the Scientific Director of Correctional Health Services at British Columbia Mental Health and Substance Use Services.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

The Co-Chairs have no conflicts of interest to report.