

INTEGRATING COMMUNITY INTO SUBSTANCE USE RESEARCH: LESSONS LEARNED FROM ESTABLISHING A COMMUNITY STEERING COMMITTEE WITHIN A RESEARCH INSTITUTION

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Background:

Typical research advisory structures have been historically harmful towards community members, particularly people who use drugs (PWUD). They may replicate harmful power dynamics and tokenize experiences, rather than adequately and meaningfully acknowledging contributions. We present our experience establishing a co-partnered community steering committee (CSC) aimed at cultivating an equitable and inclusive capacity-building environment within an academic setting.

Methods:

CSC members were recruited through outreach in PWUD-led organizations and include 12 individuals from across Canada, who collectively have lived experiences related to substance use, homelessness, HIV, the criminal justice system, and child welfare systems. The CSC is led by two Co-Chair who are elected by CSC members and serve a one-year term. Our goal is to consistently enhance the opportunities available to CSC members, avoiding the creation of often found rigid participation structures. CSC members receive compensation of \$30/hour for attending meetings and self-paced work. The CSC undertakes two activities: first, providing overall organizational strategic direction which is formalized into binding strategic goals; and second, serving as members of research teams across projects.

Results:

Relationship building – between research staff and CSC members, and CSC members alike - needs to be budgeted into the implementation of such committees, and recognized as an ongoing effort that can always be strengthened. Flexibility in time commitment and offering various engagement opportunities to the CSC should be prioritized. Creating multiple channels for activities and participation, such as anonymous feedback, sub-group work on projects, manuscript revision, and grant applications to fund CSC-led projects have helped meaningfully integrate CSC members into our organization.

Conclusion:

Establishing CSCs as co-partners within research institutions is both rewarding and challenging. It is crucial to address institutional barriers and creatively overcome them to prioritize and credit lived experience, ultimately improving research priorities and outcomes that directly impact this community.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

Dan Werb is a founder of DoseCheck, a commercial entity developing a mobile drug checking technology.