

IMPERFECT

Our Philosophy and
Principles of
Engagement

What is a Community
Engagement Worker?

PERFECTION

RUNNING A

CEW Program Goals

Outreach and
Relationship
Building

COMMUNITY

ENGAGEMENT

WORKER

Relationship-based
Information-sharing and Program
Implementation Meetings

Empowerment Through
Compensation and
Valuing Work of PWUD

PROGRAM

FOR PEOPLE

Conclusion

WHO USE DRUGS

AND TRADE SEX



<u>Our Philosophy and Principles</u> of Engagement	01
What is a <u>Community Engagement Worker</u>?	02
<u>Goals</u> of the CEW Program	03
Outreach and Relationship Building with <u>Potential CEWs</u>	05
<u>Relationship-based Weekly Information-sharing Sessions and Program <u>Implementation Meetings</u></u>	08
Empowerment Through <u>Compensation</u> and <u>Valuing Work and Expertise of <u>PWUD</u></u>	11
<u>Conclusion</u>	14



Our Philosophy and Principles of Engagement

Project SAFE: Founded in 2004, Project SAFE is an affinity-based peer-led collective and the second longest running harm reduction group in Philadelphia. We are dedicated to the health and wellbeing of our members. Many harm reduction services tend to stigmatize sex workers, which can make accessing these services difficult and dangerous for women and gender non-conforming people working in street economies. We aim to address these gaps through a bottom-up approach where the living expertise of women and queer people is centered in the implementation of harm reduction services.

The CEW program was started in 2013 with two Project SAFE collective members who had been doing secondary distribution of harm reduction supplies for many years. It was through those relationships that a philosophy and principles of engagement emerged. In this guide, we are sharing what we have learned about how to run a Community Engagement Worker program that centers people who use drugs (PWUD) and sex workers. We take the lead from them about which supplies to distribute and also engage in creative collaboration to meet community needs. For example, during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, our delivery coordinators, who facilitate distribution of bulk harm reduction supplies to various community members twice a week, were needed for COVID-19 vaccine access support. CEWs stepped in to ensure the vital Delivery Program was maintained and were a source of community connection during an otherwise bleak and isolated time.

What is a Community Engagement Worker?

CEWs are community members who have living expertise in drug use and sex work; they are paid for their time and critical knowledge, connections, and labor. CEWs are a central part of a harm reduction approach that honors the autonomy and experience of PWUD with regards to overdose prevention and the overall health and wellbeing of their communities. CEWs are invested in supporting people to practice safer consumption of substances and safer sex through accessing harm reduction supplies and information.

CEWs are not staff. We consider CEWs our collaborators and core members of our collective. Delivery coordinators are not bosses. We don't track people's hours or dictate how or to whom they distribute supplies. Delivery coordinators provide bulk harm reduction supplies and other resources and support to CEWs so that they can consistently distribute supplies to their networks and also engage in overdose prevention and other education. Our role is to materially support what people are already doing to take care of themselves and their communities. We do not place expectations on them, define their roles, or ask them to meet benchmarks. We follow their lead in defining their own scope of work. We trust that our CEWs will make the best decisions with their friends and communities about how to spend their time and to whom the supplies should go to.

Incorporating community voices, policies, and practice. The relationship is collaborative and honors both the roles of delivery coordinators and CEWs; coordinators provide supplies, funds, and access to services and CEWs provide valuable information and input about community needs and changes in drug use, sex work, and policing trends. CEWs utilize relationships in their communities and networks, especially with people who avoid engagement with any service providers due to histories of institutional trauma and mistrust. They are both equal members of a team and a part of a collective.

CEWs are not role models or “success stories” of recovery from chaotic substance use. They are people who are embedded in communities of drug use and sex work. Most of our CEWs are either current or former sex workers and/or PWUD.

Goals of the CEW Program

Building trust with CEWs and cohesion in the community: One of the ways we build trust is to give people the autonomy to make decisions about how they want to distribute supplies and use their stipends. Our trust that people will make the best decisions for themselves enables community members to trust us as partners. We also strive to be consistent and ensure that we connect weekly with CEWs on the same day and time. Given that CEWs might be unhoused people themselves, they might need support in navigating the criminal legal system, medical and mental health, and social service systems. For example, delivery coordinators have provided support such as accompanying CEWs to court and the hospital, providing CEWs food, clothes, and other items, and helping them access other community resources.

Collaborating with CEWs to extend the network and the larger community through new connections: Each CEW is deeply embedded in their communities and has a wide range of connections that are often long-standing. Our CEWs on average will distribute to at least 10-15 people who never interact with service providers, thereby expanding our reach and providing more access for more people.

Centering and legitimizing the needs of people who use drugs: The War on Drugs has created political, economic, and social conditions that disrupt the day-to-day lives of PWUD. Our members are often dealing with loss and displacement. For instance, our members are frequently evicted from their housing situations whether it's a shelter, a tent on the street, or a rented apartment. Many of our members don't have access to a cell phone or the Internet consistently. For this reason, we try our best to physically meet people where they are and remain as flexible as possible. We will meet people at places they choose outside of 9-5 service hours to accommodate their availability and schedules. If delivery coordinators are not able to connect with someone at the chosen time and place, they will attempt to connect CEWs later that same day or another day that same week.



We are not punitive towards CEWs: No one gets "kicked out" of the distribution network for not showing up or being late. What if they were locked up for drug use? What if they got picked up for an active warrant? For example, a CEW was in jail and was not able to distribute supplies for some time. The delivery coordinator put their stipend on their commissary because as a collective we prioritize their wellbeing and see it as part of ensuring long-term stability of the CEW and the communities they support. No one's supplies or access are limited due to missed meetups or being out of touch. When they return, they can rejoin. We don't use punitive practices. Occasionally, CEW stipends and supplies might be temporarily reallocated if they are not being utilized. What is vital in these instances is explicit and clear communication about stipends and supply distribution between delivery coordinators and old and new CEWs.



Outreach and Relationship Building with Potential CEWs

Project SAFE has been developing relationships with the community of women and gender nonconforming people who use drugs in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia since 2004. Between 2004 and 2010, we established the deliveries program in which we deliver bulk harm reduction supplies to street-based sex workers who use drugs for secondary distribution. These members then distribute supplies to their networks, tapping into a chain with vast, important, and unknown reaches. Secondary distribution reaches those unable to access any health or wellness services due to barriers such as transportation, chronic illness, lack of childcare, and historical trauma from institutions and systems, leading to distrust of anyone outside of their networks.

Our delivery program enabled us to develop a wide network of PWUD and our first CEWS were, and continue to be, a core part of this network. For instance, Project SAFE's first CEW already frequented shooting galleries and encampments where many local sex

workers and others used drugs. She often helped those utilizing these spaces respond to overdoses and assisted with wound care. Once she became a CEW, she had the same role but now she had boxes of 'works' and other harm reduction supplies with her to give out to those in need of supplies. Another long-term CEW spoke to the importance of the trusting relationship she had developed with the deliveries coordinator: *"If I don't have a bond with somebody, they wouldn't have my number to call. For me, having a bond with somebody is very important. If I didn't have you in my life as a friend, I would have kept a lot of things to myself...which can destroy somebody. I feel like personally, we have a lot in common...the sex work industry. Your mind is so open, you listen to anything. You don't take it with a grain of salt. You take it as it is. And that's probably the realest shit I've ever felt from someone who doesn't use drugs (the way I do)."*

From this experience, we learned that the simplest way to identify CEWs is to find people already immersed in supporting their communities (i.e., those who already have connections, relationships, and living expertise). Sometimes it can be as easy as giving these community members additional resources, often the resources they have already been asking for to no avail. Once relationships are established, the newly existing CEWs can help identify other potential CEWs and people in need of supplies. We aim to prioritize people who are embedded in networks of PWUD who are the most marginalized and face the most barriers to getting their basic needs met. Our CEWs have used the supplies and stipends they receive to not only meet their needs but also support other members of their community: *“When I get paid now the stipend, when I hand out the bags...the people I know really struggle. I know girls on the avenue. The avenue is just not safe. I’ve been there- it’s a really shitty place to be. I found myself using that money not just for myself, but I ask a lot of people who are close to me, who I care about, ‘are you hungry? Do you want to get something to eat?’ I will go with them, and I will order them something to eat. So that money is not just me doing what I am doing, it’s like people who I know really struggle, who have a hard time getting dates, who really are hungry, who need to get well. They need to eat; they need to shower.”*

Perhaps the most important element of the program is establishing a relationship of reciprocity in which CEWs enhance existing services and are also benefiting from those same services. One of our CEWs describes how she navigates meeting her own needs and those of others in her community: *“I feel like it’s a team. I personally give a lot of stuff away. When I was using, I kept some stuff because, of course, my habit was vicious. I am very much a helper. I really enjoy being able to help somebody no matter what the situation is. So even when I was getting high, I wouldn’t have a problem if somebody asked me if I had some extra works or whatever, I wouldn’t mind giving them some from my own purse because they needed it. They could take that now and get well instead of buying works. And then being able to say I work with Project SAFE, people who are trying to help the community.”*





Relationship-based Weekly Information-sharing Session and Program Implementation Meetings

CEWs providing expertise and information guiding the program:

As a collective, we have been able to center the needs of sex workers and PWUD by soliciting feedback and listening closely to our members when they choose to share about their daily lives and struggles. This has enabled us to identify unmet needs and to be responsive to emerging trends. We position ourselves as a conduit for information between communities of people who trade sex and use drugs. Much of the information that CEWs provide us pertains to sex work, drug use, and policing trends. CEWs often also clue us in to new and emerging resources and vice versa. For instance, CEWs have shared the following types of information with us:

Information about drugs: *“Drug wise we know what’s good, what’s not. We know how many Narcans are going to work. We know what dope is killing people.”* Our members will often inform us of a ‘bad stamp’, and we will then pass that information on to other PWUD that we interact with.



Information about dangerous

sex work clients: Our members regularly provide us with bad date alerts (BDAs) which are then printed and distributed to street-based sex workers. One CEW said: *“In the streets the bad date sheets are fabulous. I don’t know how many times I’ve read one and had to re-read it because I noticed that vehicle or I seen a guy walking past me and said one of the similar things I’ve just read.”*

Information about supplies

needed: One summer, several of our members were brutally attacked by a man who was posing as a client

and attempting to murder street-based sex workers. Several people made reports about him, and his description appeared multiple times on the BDA. When we asked members what they needed at that time to stay safer, they said pepper spray. We fundraised and have been providing pepper spray on and off since that time.

Information about supply preference: Our members have given us consistent feedback on what to include in our injection, safer sex, and safer smoking kits. For instance, when a specific syringe brand was discontinued, our members guided us in finding a suitable replacement. When we started ordering syringes in 10 packs, our members told us that blister packs were more useful for them, so we switched.

Importance of relationships: Much of the information that CEWs share with us is sensitive due to the criminalization of many of the activities that our members engage in to survive. Trust between CEWs and coordinators has been built slowly over time through being responsive to the needs of our community, being reliable, and showing up for them when crises emerge. One of our longstanding CEWs describes her relationship with one

of the delivery coordinators and the collective, as well as the impact that it had on her ability to show up for others: *“A couple of times I went to jail and Lulu has always been there for me. At my court hearings, one of my biggest supporters. No matter what I am going through, Project SAFE has always been there as my bottom. People who I can call and talk to about anything. People who I can talk to other people about and give them the phone numbers and their information and tell them that they are there to support them... There is no judgment, no condemning somebody for what they’ve done or how their life has been. There is just support and just help. For me that’s the thing I’ve always known. There’s some really fucked up people in the world, but it’s been far and few times in between that I’ve felt like sincere concern and love and acceptance from people, and I feel that from Project SAFE. And that’s helped me be a more understanding and concerned person.”*

Dealing with complexities arising from the intersections of

criminalization, poverty, and houselessness: When people are constantly in crisis because of structural violence, boundaries become complicated. People are often in survival mode, and they are trying to meet their needs in the best ways that they know how. That might include asking for advances on their stipends, getting a little extra compensation, or asking for other material needs such as a taxi ride to meet a family member. When we have encountered these situations, we try to remember that we are talking with a community member and do not chastise or shame them for having a need. We encourage you to check in with yourself, see what it’s bringing up for you and respond in a way that communicates empathy and acknowledges the gravity of the ask. For instance, you might say, “I wish you didn’t have to deal with that situation. I wish I could help you, but I am tapped out this week. I can’t give you an advance. Is there another way that I could support you?”

Burnout: We are an all-volunteer collective that chooses to do this work because it aligns with our personal and political values. Our collective members are our friends, chosen family, and community. When it starts to feel like work, that’s a good indication that we are approaching burnout and need to be realistic about our capacities to show up. We believe in showing up as our full selves, which means that we must be able to communicate

how community members are impacting us when their needs and our own needs are in conflict. Many of our collective members are also current or former drug users and sex workers. Witnessing the effects of the violence of criminalization and incarceration on our members takes a toll. Being able to support each other and have honest and consistent check-ins about capacity and vicarious trauma is vital for the sustainability of our collective and of the CEWs program.

Empowerment through Compensation and Valuing Work and Expertise of PWUD

Our approach to supplies and honoring autonomy: Our CEWs and other members are often in survival mode, and we trust that they will use the supplies we provide them to meet both individual and community needs. Given the lack of access to resources, we expect that our CEWs will sell some of the supplies we give them, especially since the stipend is not a living wage. Our delivery coordinators often engage in direct conversations acknowledging the co-existence of deep unmet individual needs and the community's need for free syringes and other supplies. One of our delivery coordinators puts it this way: *"It's chill if someone sells a couple works. It's unrealistic to expect that someone who gets 500 works a week wouldn't utilize that resource in a time of need. Is chastising someone for selling a couple of works to buy a sandwich or something else they need based in the idea of harm reduction?"*

Compensation that's more than an Amazon gift card: It is important for CEWs to be paid in cash for the real, and hard work they are doing. Our stance is to not police what CEWs do with their money and therefore they use their money to buy whatever they need. Our members engage in various cash-based street economies and deserve to be paid in cash to continue participating in them. Getting a gift card for hard work, although sometimes the only option, is infantilizing and demeaning. Gift cards ignore the material realities of our members and attempt to both control and limit what they can buy and where they can buy what they need.

Jess' Story

“This girl Jess, I really love her. She is not innocent, but she doesn't belong. She is one of those people who are just not fitting in in this Kensington Avenue environment. And every week I make sure I see her. There's this lady's house that she goes to, to shower. The lady is really strict- she won't let her in unless she pays her \$20 so that she can shower and get well. So, every time I get paid, I make sure I meet up with her and we'll get something to eat. I'll take her over there and drop her off. Last week we went to Crown Fried Chicken- she got something to eat. Then we went to the lady's house-- I gave the lady the money. I gave her \$40. She said that she can go in, get well, she can shower, and she could even sleep for a little while. I know what it's like to be out there and not have anything. I am from four hours away so when I came down here and got strung out, it was a shitty situation to be by myself. Not being able to eat every day, not being able to get well, and to not have nobody.”

Our hope is that Jess' story illustrates how money is shared among community members and how gift cards can be restrictive. Gift cards force people to interact with institutions that are not friendly to people in underground economies. Cash allows people to navigate different aspects of the underground economy with the people that they are building relationships with. Cash is a currency that builds both trust and supportive networks; it is versatile and enables people to access both above ground and underground resources.

Distributing the stipends: All of our CEWs have current or prior entanglement in the prison system and secondary distribution puts them at further risk of criminalization due to draconian paraphernalia, drug, and prostitution laws. Given this context, we believe that collecting any identifying information on our CEWs such as W-2s and social security numbers contradicts the ethics of harm reduction. We work to provide stipends in the most accessible way possible. CEWs might have differing access to banks, credit cards/electronic payment apps, phones, and housing. Therefore, the way the stipends are dispersed should be tailored to each CEW. For instance, some CEWs get a cash drop-off once a month, and some receive it weekly as they can't store money. Whatever the system, it should be decided by each worker individually.

Conclusions

Outcomes: Our CEW program has impacted our members on both the individual and communal levels.

While reflecting on her work as a community engagement worker, one member remarked that her work and presence have inspired people to make changes: *“People I have reached out to and people who have felt me and understand what I’m doing and saying, I feel like a lot of things have changed for some of them. Like their outlook changes, their desire to want to be better might change or might grow. [As a result of the support I am giving them] not just hearing what I’m saying but being able to see it, see the action of it, see the effect that it has. It can help people realize the change that it can have on them.”*

The stipend and the work that these members engage in can also have a huge impact on their life trajectory. As a result of receiving the stipend and access to supplies, both of our original and long-standing CEWs were able to achieve more stable housing. One member stabilized her drug use during some periods and another CEW stopped injecting altogether. Another member was able to save up enough money to purchase a car and find a job.

One of our Community Engagement Workers, Sandy (using a pseudonym for confidentiality) was arrested and jailed for 6 months. Our volunteers' advocacy through letter writing and court support positively impacted the outcome. Our delivery coordinator wrote a character letter that the public defender shared with the judge and two of our volunteers were able to speak to the court about our relationships with Sandy and what a vital member of our community she is. The judge accepted time served and stipulated she participate in a treatment program upon release. She will be on probation for the next three years. She was facing a possible 22-month sentence, so this was tremendous news.

We will continue to support Sandy moving forward as she was experiencing street homelessness before her arrest. We are hoping to get her into the Prevention Point shelter upon exiting the treatment program, so that she may qualify again for a housing program. We may also organize a fundraiser to support her with housing and necessary supplies to rebuild.

Another Community Engagement Worker's monthly stipend enabled her to relocate from her last apartment where her abusive ex-partner was stalking her. Due to the financial support, she was able to get a room in a new location that is unknown to her ex-partner.

Overall, the Community Engagement Worker program has strengthened service delivery because it has allowed us to stay in touch with changing material conditions on the ground and stay responsive to emerging needs.





