

FAMILY CONNECTIONS

Edited by Katie Cribb, Melanie Griffiths and Colleen Stewart

ALL ABOUT VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION



For this edition of the newsletter, we wanted to highlight Vocational Rehabilitation Services, a hidden gem of a service within the Mental Health and Substance Use program. They are an important part of many people's journey of recovery. Vocational rehabilitation means helping people learn the skills they need to get a job or return to work after an illness, injury, or disability. At VCH, we have a wide range of vocational services, including vocational counselors, dedicated vocational teams (Gastown Vocational Services), innovative vocational programs (Willow Bean), and a peer support work training program.

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Hyunju Kim

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Sometimes supporting your loved one requires you to acknowledge that you are not able and/or capable of providing them with what they need. Please remember that if your loved one is at risk to themselves or others, the best resources are to call "911" or go to your local Emergency Department. In Vancouver, for non-emergency mental health support, please contact the Access and Assessment Center (AAC). If you or someone you know needs substance use support, call Access Central. Information for both is provided below:

AAC CONTACT INFORMATION:

Hours: 7:30 am - 10:00 pm 7 days/week; 365 days/year

Phone: 604-675-3700

Address: Joseph & Rosalie Segal Family Health Centre,
803 West 12th Avenue, Level 1

Access Central information

Hours: 9 am-7:45 pm 7 days/ week

Phone (toll free): 1866-658-1221

(Voicemails left after hours are answered the following morning)

FAMILY SUPPORT AND INVOLVEMENT TEAM

MELANIE GRIFFITHS

Coordinator, Acute

(604) 290-3817

Melanie.Griffiths@vch.ca

KATIE CRIBB

Coordinator, Tertiary

(236) 885-8169

Katie.Cribb@vch.ca

COLLEEN STEWART

Coordinator, Community

(604) 314-9032

Colleen.Stewart@vch.ca

JENNIFER GLASGOW

FSI Manager

778-879-3293

Jennifer.Glasgow@vch.ca

TERRITORIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Vancouver Coastal facilities lie on the unceded and occupied territories and waterways of the fourteen First Nation communities of Heiltsuk, Kitasoo-Xai'xais, Lil'wat, Musqueam, N'Quatqua, Nuxalk, Samahquam, Sechelt, Skatin, Squamish, Tla'amin, Tsleil-Waututh, Wuikinuxv, and Xa'xtsa. To find out more about the Indigenous territories where you reside, one option is the website native-land.ca

ABOUT US

This newsletter is brought to you by Vancouver Coastal Health's Family Support and Involvement Team. We assist families with resources, education, information, support, and with facilitating the inclusion of family in the care of their loved ones. We also work with patient and family partners to ensure that clients and families are involved in planning and decision making across Vancouver Coastal Health's Mental Health and Substance Use Services. You can find our contact information on the front page.

The Family Connections Newsletter is available electronically, direct to your email inbox. If you don't already receive Family Connections via email and would like to stay up-to-date about programs and services for families who are supporting a loved one with mental illness and/or substance use, sign up at www.spotlightonmentalhealth.com

By going to this website and clicking on the [Family](#) tab you can find our [Community Resource Guide for Families](#), Vancouver Coastal Health's [Family Involvement Policy](#) and much more.

THANKS FOR READING!

VANCOUVER FAMILY ADVISORY COMMITTEE (FAC)

A Partnership with Vancouver Mental Health & Substance Use Services

Who Are We? We are Vancouver parents, siblings, adult children and friends of those living with serious mental illness and substance use. We are individuals with lived experience. We are community agency representatives, Mental Health & Substance Use professionals, and the VCH Family Support & Involvement (FSI) team. Together, we are the Family Advisory Committee.

The FAC provides a strong family perspective to improve services for our loved ones, and expand communication and supports for caregivers and families.



If you feel inspired to join our efforts, or simply want to learn more about the FAC, please check out our webpage.

Website: vch.ca/en/vancouver-mental-health-and-substance-use-family-advisory-committee

To connect, email us at: VancouverFAC@vch.ca

WE'RE ALWAYS LOOKING FOR NEW MEMBERS!

PEER SUPPORT WORK TRAINING

by Katie Cribb

Special thanks to Ron Carten, whose expertise was instrumental in writing this article

One career option that some people with lived experience of mental health and substance use (MHSU) choose to pursue when they are in a state of recovery and stability is Peer Support Work (PSW). Many family members may have heard of peer support work before but are unsure of what the work entails and how their loved-one could pursue it.

Peer Support Work Training is a Pathway to Meaningful Employment, Skill Development, Confidence, and Community

What is Peer Support Work?

Peer support involves leveraging personal experiences to caringly connect with and support others who are navigating similar experiences with mental health and/or substance use. Peers walk beside others supporting them their own recovery and meeting their own goals.

At VCH Peer Support Workers work in flexible short term contract roles and in permanent unionized positions. Some workplace examples include:

- Community mental health and substance use teams
- Harm Reduction Peer Based Programs
- Hospital Emergency Rooms
- Substance Use Recovery and Treatment Sites

Other potential employers for peer support workers include non-profits, community centers, social housing, and neighborhood houses.

Why Peer Support Matters?

For people receiving care from peers, who truly understand what it means to be a service user, this can build trust, connection, and hope. For people with lived experience working as a peer support worker is empowering, an opportunity to model how lived experience with mental health and substance use can be a valuable asset in this work setting. Peer work can be a rewarding life-long career or a jumping off point for someone to figure out what they would like in a job or volunteer position.



What are the job qualifications to be a Peer Support Worker?

Beyond having lived experience and desire to support others in their recovery, there are other qualifications to also consider. Depending on where your loved one would like to work, different levels of training may be required or highly recommended to be a competitive applicant. Health Authorities generally have the completion of recognized peer support worker training program or a diploma in Community Social Services listed as a qualification. For some positions, such as those in health authorities, computer literacy is important as health care workers are expected to answer emails, take online trainings, and navigate electric health records.

Some non-profits do not require formal training to be hired as a peer support worker. For all peer positions, having volunteer experience with people and resources in the community a peer wants to work in is a valuable experience.

What if my loved one is not quite ready for supporting others or returning to a MHSU site?

For those beginning in their journey towards becoming a PSW, the Peer Connect BC Provincial Peer Support Worker Training can provide a strong foundation. This is a free online course that covers a wide range of topics and is a prerequisite to the VCH MHSU Peer Support Training. It can be found at: <https://peerconnectbc.ca/>

PEER SUPPORT WORK TRAINING

Local and No-Cost Recognized Peer Support Worker Trainings:

There are several recognized training options within Vancouver. They are all free and offer a combination of classroom learning and work experience through a practicum at a local mental health and/or substance use program.

VCH Consumer Initiatives and Involvement program

<https://spotlightonmentalhealth.com/peer-support-training/>

Coast Mental Health

<https://www.coastmentalhealth.com/what-we-do/pillar-services/>

Open Door Group Thrive program

<https://www.opendoorgroup.org/programs/thrive-leisure-and-recreation/peer-support-worker-training-work-experience>

North Shore VCH MH Kelty center program

<https://community.nscr.ca/intergenns-program-directory/vancouver-coastal-health/>

Fraser Health through Communitas Supportive Care Society

<https://peersupportcsc.com/>

Areas of learning include roles and responsibilities of a peer support worker, communication, boundaries, strengths-based approach/psychosocial rehabilitation principles, trauma-informed care, motivational interviewing, and confidentiality.

Completing a peer support training, can not only boost skills, but can also boost confidence. Additionally, meeting other people who have had the similar experiences can be help form bonds and new friendships. All important aspects of recovery.

Post training, what else do I put on a peer support resume, and will having a gap in my resume limit my ability to get a PSW Role?

In general, gaps in someone's resume will not limit their ability to get peer work. Employers understand that recovery takes time. Being open about gaps and highlighting lived experience as a strength can make a

resume stand out. Peers are often involved in the hiring process and can also ensure others know how recovery takes time.

If someone is concerned about a lack of prior experience, volunteering could be a good way to fill out their resume before or while they are starting to look for peer work. To gain volunteer experience, a local program to get experience through is Get Set & Connect (<https://www.getsetconnect.ca/>). This program offers One to One Leisure and Volunteer Access Coaching, connecting with others through peer led leisure activities in the community and Independent & Group Volunteer Exploration.

How to support a loved-one who is interested in this field?

If your loved-one is considering peer support work, your encouragement could make a big difference. Here are some practices to consider.

Learning about the peer support worker role: Reading this article is a great first step to understanding peer support work.

Providing emotional support: Generally, the training could lead to anxiety producing situations where supporting someone to calm their fears and work through their worries could be helpful. Also, recognize that being an employee in a system where someone was a patient in the past might bring up complicated feelings. Discussing concerns and anxieties about going to a MHSU workplace could help someone gain the strength to take the first steps.

Providing practical support: For example, everyone is different, for some helping to make a schedule to complete the online training could be helpful. For others, checking in with them can be helpful and providing encouragement.

Respecting your loved-one's autonomy to decide what feels right for them regarding peer work is one of the most important aspects of providing support. Someone may start the process of becoming a peer worker only to determine that this is not the right path for them at this time.

The Vancouver Consumer Involvement and Initiatives Team

Vancouver Community programs for people with lived and living experience:

- Consumer Initiative Fund
 - Grants funding for peer-led community projects that could benefit peers in Vancouver Community – they do multiple draws a year up to \$8000; Art Grant; Education & Leisure Fund
 - <https://spotlightonmentalhealth.com/consumer-initiative-fund/>
- Peer Led Workshops
 - The Peer Led Workshops program offers free workshops and support groups led by individuals who have lived/living experience with mental health and/or substance use challenges.
 - <https://spotlightonmentalhealth.com/peer-led-workshops/>
- Peer Support Program
 - Offers formal training to those with lived experience receiving mental health services and who qualify for paid work providing support to others.
- Lived Experience Advisory Network (LEAN)
 - Individuals who self-identify as people with lived/living experience of mental health and substance use issues (PWLLE) are encouraged to join LEAN to find out about VCH Mental Health and Substance Use program updates, initiatives and advisory opportunities. All are welcome.
 - <https://spotlightonmentalhealth.com/lived-experience-advisory-network-lean/>

SPOTLIGHT ON VOCATIONAL COUNSELLING: HYUNJU KIM

by Colleen Stewart

Today, we will meet Hyunju Kim, who will discuss her role as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellor, with Vancouver Coastal Health's South Mental Health and Substance Use team.

Vocational Rehabilitation Counselling lies within the broader service delivery model of psychosocial rehabilitation where mental health and substance use teams provide individual and group services to improve mental, emotional, physical, social and spiritual wellness and includes seeking and obtaining employment (VCH, n.d.) Vocational Rehabilitation Counselling supports individuals explore their vocational interests and establish their employment goals. The population that Hyunju serves are individuals with Mental Health and/or Substance Use issues and her role is to support these individuals enter, or re-integrate into the work force using job strategies, return-to-work planning, supported employment or recommending workplace accommodations (VCH, 2026).



Photo used by permission

Hyunju has a Master's degree in hospitality management and a Vocational Rehabilitation and Disability Management Diploma. Currently, she is working towards a Masters degree in Counselling. She is contracted by VCH through the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) Lower Mainland to provide the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) program. Hyunju describes her role as helping people find their career path and meet their career objectives; connect with the right resources; pursue appropriate training, education and mentoring; find and retain employment; and help individuals return to work. She assists with job research, short-term training, résumé building and interview preparation. She also supports clients after they secure employment for ongoing job maintenance and will connect with their employer for follow up if the client requests it.



Hyunju works with individuals who have mental health and substance use issues and may have a limited capacity to the number of hours they work or tasks they can complete. For example, some may have anxiety, cannot leave their home and may find it a challenge to pursue training. These individuals may need to take steps towards employability and employment in their own timing, when they are ready. While providing vocational support Hyunju may concurrently connect clients to additional support, such as working with an Occupational Therapist.



Hyunju also recognizes that, at times, her clients may need to be pushed out of their comfort zone, and she will gently nudge them toward a next step or to take a risk. Hyunju understands the nuances of this juxtaposition, and this is a skill that she respects and hones.

Hyunju states that seeing others succeed is a very rewarding part of the job-search process: her clients are special to her, and she empathizes with them. She sees it as an opportunity for her own personal growth, self-reflection and says the results can be very professionally and personally rewarding. For her clients, finding a meaningful job can be life-changing.

Clients with mental health or substance use challenges may face a variety of barriers, including navigating stigma. Hyunju will reframe this challenge by using it as an opportunity for them to learn and develop strategies to succeed in the workplace. She takes a strengths-based perspective and tells her clients that they do not have to disclose mental health or substance use issues to potential employers, as this is entirely a personal choice.

The main requirement to secure employment by way of the IPS program, is a genuine desire to find competitive employment without delay. For clients who may need to develop preliminary skills before entering the workforce, such as time management or life skills, Hyunju may refer them to an internal MHSU support, like an Occupational Therapist, or to an external community partner. Once clients are ready to find work, they can access the services of a Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellor, like Hyunju.

Hyunju greatly appreciates working at the South Mental Health & Substance team and the support of the leadership: Jennifer Glasgow, Deya Saymah and Christine Lee.

Job Opportunity

EMPLOYMENT

REFERENCES

Vancouver Coastal Health (2025). Professional practice: vocational rehabilitation counselling. <https://one.vch.ca/dept-project/Professional-Practice-Vocational-Rehabilitation-Counselling>

Vancouver Coastal Health (n.d.). Steps Services: Psychosocial Rehab and Counselling. <https://www.vch.ca/en/service/steps-services#overview>

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE...

Between VCH MHSU Vocational Rehabilitation and Gastown Vocational Services (GVS)? by Colleen Stewart

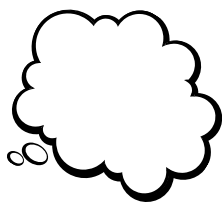
Accessing VCH services

Referral to Vocational Counselling is made by an MHSU clinician after a client is accepted by an MHSU team. The MHSU clinician may be a:

Case Manager
Concurrent Disorder Clinician
Rehab team - Occupational therapist or Recreational Therapist
Family Support and Involvement Coordinator
Nurse who specializes in substance use medicine
Peer worker
Physician who specializes in substance use medicine
Psychiatrist

- Services include: Assessment & Planning;
- Job Retention/Return to Work; Training & Education;
- Job Search Assistance; Support for Diverse Needs: Assisting individuals with chronic illnesses, developmental disabilities, or injuries.

VCH owns and operates the MHSU teams in the community. VCH contracts Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellors from the Canadian Mental Health Association and does not include Gastown Vocational Services



Accessing GVS

Service seekers can contact GVS directly

A physician, nurse practitioner or psychiatrist must oversee individual's mental health care

GVS specializes in working with people with mental health conditions and assists eligible clients attain meaningful employment, volunteerism or access to educational/ skills training programs.

GVS eligibility criteria includes:

Must be a resident of the City of Vancouver
Have a Mental Health and/or Substance Use issue
Is not eligible for vocational support elsewhere in the system
Have Canadian Citizenship, be a Permanent Resident or have refugee status
Be a youth/young adult age 16-29 who is not in school* or employed more than 20 hours/week (eligible if attending high school)
Adult job seekers age 29+ who are unemployed or working less than 20 hours/week

GVS is part of the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, and operates as a WorkBC subcontractor and also provides unique programs supported by the Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills



Vocational Rehabilitation information for VCH adapted from the Canadian Mental Health Association website: <https://bc.cmha.ca/programs-services/links-to-employment/>

For more information, see Gastown Vocational Services: <https://www.gvssupport.ca/>

MY LOVED ONE IS IN HOSPITAL - WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THEIR EMPLOYMENT?

By Melanie Griffiths

When a family member is admitted to an acute psychiatric hospital, it can be a time filled with uncertainty and worry—not only about their health and recovery but also about practical matters like their job. Employment often plays a vital role in a person's identity, financial security, and sense of purpose, so naturally, families wonder: What happens to their job while they're in hospital? What rights do they have? And how can I support them through this?

COMMON CONCERNS FAMILIES HAVE

CONFIDENTIALITY

One of the first questions families often ask is whether their loved one's diagnosis or hospitalization will be disclosed to their employer. Patient confidentiality is a cornerstone of healthcare. Unless the patient consents, medical information—including mental health status—is kept private. Employers generally only need to know if an employee will be absent or requires accommodation, not the details of their condition.

STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION

Unfortunately, stigma around mental health can create fears about job security. Families worry about whether their loved one might face discrimination or unfair treatment at work once they return. Beyond systemic discrimination, many individuals also encounter subtle, unspoken stigma—sideways glances, whispered conversations, or the feeling that colleagues are quietly judging or distancing themselves. These informal responses can be just as isolating and damaging, reinforcing feelings of shame or self-doubt. It's important to remember that laws protect employees from discrimination based on mental health conditions, and employers are required to provide reasonable accommodations. However, addressing unspoken stigma in workplace culture is equally critical to fostering a truly supportive environment.



Families can help by encouraging open conversations about mental health and supporting their loved ones in seeking allies, including supervisors or HR personnel, who can offer guidance and advocacy. If stigma comes from leadership, it's especially important to help your loved one identify trusted sources of support within or outside the organization, such as employee assistance programs or mental health advocates. Reminding your loved one that they deserve respect and reasonable support—and that they are not alone—can empower them to face these challenges with confidence.

CAPABILITY AND RECOVERY

Families may question if their loved one will be able to return to work at the same capacity. This depends on many factors, including the nature of their job, the severity of their illness, and their recovery progress. The focus during hospitalization is to stabilize symptoms and begin planning a safe and sustainable return to daily life, which often includes employment.

BENEFITS AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT

If a loved one cannot work for an extended period, families might wonder about disability benefits, sick leave, or other financial supports. Staff at the hospital can help navigate these complex systems and guide families toward resources that may be available.

THE ROLE OF THE INTERDISCIPLINARY CARE TEAM

During an acute psychiatric hospitalization, your loved one is cared for by a team of professionals who work collaboratively to support their recovery and plan for the future—including their employment.

- Psychiatrists oversee diagnosis, treatment, and medication management.
- Social Workers connect patients and families with community resources, help with benefits and discharge planning, and provide counselling.
- Occupational Therapists (OTs) assess the patient's functional abilities and help develop skills to return to daily activities, including work. OTs refer patients to employment programs in the community. (See resource list below for examples of such programs)
- Care Management Leaders coordinate the team's efforts and ensure smooth communication between the hospital, family, and outside agencies.

Together, the team develops a personalized plan considering your loved one's needs, strengths, and goals. They may discuss potential workplace accommodations, gradual return-to-work plans, or alternative job options if needed.

HOW FAMILIES CAN SUPPORT THEIR LOVED ONE

FAMILIES PLAY A CRUCIAL ROLE IN THEIR LOVED ONE'S RECOVERY AND EMPLOYMENT JOURNEY



- ✓ **Stay informed and Communicate**
Ask questions and attend meetings with the care team to understand the treatment plan and what supports are available. Open communication helps you advocate effectively.
- ✓ **Encourage and Support Recovery**
Recovery from a mental health crisis is not straightforward. Show patience, understanding, and encouragement as your loved one rebuilds confidence and skills.
- ✓ **Help with Practical Matters**
Assist with organizing medical appointments, paperwork for benefits, or discussions with employers if your loved one wishes.
- ✓ **Respect Privacy and Autonomy**
Allow your loved one to control what they share about their health and employment. Support their choices and respect their boundaries.

Navigating employment concerns during psychiatric hospitalization can feel overwhelming, but with the right information, professional support, and family involvement, your loved one's journey back to work and wellness can be a hopeful one. If you have questions or need guidance, don't hesitate to speak with your loved one's care team—they are here to help.

EMPLOYMENT RESOURCES

- [Canadian Mental Health Association](#)
- [WorkBC Employment services](#)
- [Neil Squire Society - Creative Employment Options](#)



- Vancouver only: [Gastown Vocational Services](#)
- Disability Alliance B.C. - [Disclosing Your Disability: A Legal Guide for People with Disabilities in BC](#)
- [Coast Clubhouse Employment & Education Programs](#)



The Willow Bean Cafe

A vocational opportunity for those receiving mental health treatment at Willow Pavilion

By Katie Cribb

Thanks to the Willow Bean Cafe, the smell of coffee welcomes those who come to the VCH tertiary site Willow Pavilion. The building consists of four long-term in-patient units that focus on assessment, treatment, and recovery; specialized for individuals with complex mental health needs.

The Cafe is an innovative program ran by a team including a Job Developer and Peer Support Workers. Its focus is on creating a supportive space where customers and clients learning vocational skills can enjoy a brief, positive interaction during their day.

The Bean's Impact

- **Work Exposure:** By employing clients of the pavilion, the cafe offers valuable work experience, aiding client's journey toward recovery and reintegration.
- **Community Building:** Though small, the Café is a place where clients can connect, even briefly, contributing to a sense of community within the hospital.
- **Affordable Quality:** We offer a range of quick, healthy snacks and beverages at prices everyone can afford. We operate in a way that balances financial sustainability with our commitment to serving our community.



FAMILY CONNECTIONS SUPPORT GROUP

The Family Support and Involvement Team offers a support group for family and friends of individuals with mental illness and/or substance use concerns. We provide a welcoming and supportive space where family members can share their experiences, as well as to feel empowered to continue to support their loved ones. An education component is included during the session, time-permitting.

WE MEET ONLINE ON THE FOLLOWING

DAYS: The **first** Thursday and **third** Monday of every month, except Stat holidays.

TIME: 6:00 – 8:00 p.m.

PLACE: In the comfort of your own home by Zoom

If you would like to receive an invitation to the support group, please contact us and we will add you to our list

Email: familyconnections@vch.ca



***“WHATEVER YOU ARE STRUGGLING WITH,
THERE ARE OTHERS OUT THERE WHO
UNDERSTAND”***

TIDBITS FROM THE FAMILY CONNECTIONS SUPPORT GROUP

A selection of resources and information discussed at the Family Connections Support groups!

RAAC (Rapid Access Addictions Clinic for substance use, St. Paul's)

Dr. Marsha Linehan Her website outlines a number of helpful publications and resources for the treatment of Border Line Personality disorder. Dr. Linehan is the founder of Dialectical Behavioral Therapy.

Daniel Vigo at the Fasmi Annual Meeting (53 Min Video) - Dr. Vigo's presentation Transforming BC's System of Care for a New Clinical Triad: Focus on severe mental illness.

Benefits2 - One family member had success using this company to fill out the necessary administrative paper work for disability tax credit and registered disability saving plan.