

Executive Summary

Public libraries are increasingly serving on the frontlines of mental health, substance use, and housing crises. At the Hamilton Public Library (HPL) Central branch, these pressures are encountered daily, as staff support members experiencing complex and intersecting forms of social vulnerability while also maintaining a safe and accessible space for the community.

In response to these conditions, HPL has expanded its service model to include on-site social supports, including the integration of peer support workers through a partnership with the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) Hamilton Branch and McMaster University’s Community Research Platform. These partners are conducting research that examines how peer support operates within the library and what difference it makes in practice.

Findings show that peer support is a highly effective and efficient approach to improving safety, de-escalating crises, and increasing access to services. Grounded in lived and living experience, peers offer a relational form of care that differs from more traditional institutional or security-based responses. They build trust with community members, respond to mental health and substance use concerns, and connect individuals to housing, employment, healthcare, and other essential resources. In doing so, they not only support members in need, but also improve working conditions for staff and create a more stable, welcoming environment for the public.

At present, however, peer support at HPL Central is limited in scope and availability due to resource constraints. Peer support coverage does not consistently extend into evenings and weekends, resulting in service gaps, increased strain on library staff, and greater reliance on less effective or more punitive crisis management approaches.

This report demonstrates that peer support is an essential component of contemporary public library service provision. It also underscores the urgent need for sustained and expanded investment in peer-based models of care, particularly in high-demand community settings such as HPL Central, to ensure that libraries can continue to function as safe, inclusive, and supportive public spaces.

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Study Background

This report was authored by **Dr. Loa Gordon**, a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Anthropology at McMaster University and the Assistant Director of McMaster's Centre for Advanced Research on Mental Health and Society. Loa is an applied medical anthropologist who uses ethnographic approaches to address public health crises. Her research is concerned with mental health experiences, non-clinical approaches to care, and how social suffering is managed in everyday life. This report shares early findings from the *Peer Support in Public Libraries: Understanding Relational Care in Action* study and was prepared in consultation with:

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- **Leora Sas van der Linden** (Program Manager of McMaster's Community Research Platform)
- **Sarah Gauthier** (Manager of Central Information Services at the Hamilton Public Library)
- **Sue Phipps** (Chief Executive Officer at the Canadian Mental Health Association, Hamilton Branch)
- **Mary Ellen Ruddell** (Director of Mental Health Court Support and Peer Support Services at the Canadian Mental Health Association, Hamilton Branch).

This summary report is based on seven months of intensive ethnographic fieldwork at the Hamilton Public Library's Central Branch in Hamilton, Ontario (September 2025–March 2026). Loa conducted regular in-person observations at the library and documented her findings in detailed fieldnotes. During field visits, Loa closely shadowed peer support workers as they attended to members within and around the library. Activities included roving the four library floors, checking in on members in need, providing one-on-one support to members in need, sitting at a community partner desk to share resources with the public, conducting safety checks in the bathrooms, responding to emergency calls, and accompanying peers and their clients to off-site appointments.

During fieldwork, Loa interfaced not just with peer support workers but also with the many other inter-professional personnel they worked alongside. Some were embedded within information sciences like librarians, library leadership, and library pages. Others were more closely aligned to public safety like security, police, and paramedics. Fieldnotes were supplemented by semi-structured interviews with key clients and staff who have frequent interactions with the peers.

This study emerged from a partnered team seeking to build capacity for relational mental health care in Ontario's social infrastructure organizations. McMaster's Community Research Platform advances community engaged research that addresses critical societal challenges and contributes to increased health and wellbeing in the Greater Hamilton Area. Both the Hamilton Public Library (HPL) and the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) Hamilton Branch are platform partners, and so the research questions, fieldwork procedures, and study protocols were devised in concert with leadership at both organizations. During the process of ongoing consultation, Loa and James joined in occasional meetings with the peers and CMHA staff at the organization's headquarters.

What is happening at the library?

Amid municipal, provincial, and federal divestment in social services, libraries have become de facto points of contact for people enduring social challenges like mental health, addiction, and homelessness. While public libraries were not originally designed to function as social service centers, they have adapted to serve public support needs out of necessity. Yet, without a formal mandate, appropriate training, or sufficient funding, public libraries remain in a challenging position trying to balance their traditional role as accessible informational institutions with their new function as frontline social infrastructure for people in need.

The Hamilton Public Library's Central branch is a key exemplar of a public library serving on the frontlines of converging housing, mental illness, and substance use crises. Increasing numbers of people experiencing social vulnerability are turning to the Hamilton Public Library (HPL) not only to read and learn but also to find shelter, warmth, use restrooms, access technology, seek social connection, and find a sense of stability in otherwise precarious lives. HPL has assumed an expanded social service role without the structural or financial supports needed to sustain these additional responsibilities.

As the roles of libraries have shifted, so have the roles of library workers. Library staff are frequently required to handle situations that fall well beyond their traditional expertise and professional scope. Many staff report feeling overwhelmed, unprepared, and under resourced when attempting to navigating social, structural, and systemic challenges at work – sometimes resulting in experiences of anxiety, burnout, fear, uncertainty, and anger. Moreover, the transforming roles of public libraries have introduced new challenges related to safety, violence, and incivility, where staff are frequently encountering patrons in distress. Library staff at HPL Central frequently encounter challenges such as:

- Members in psychological distress or states of delusion
- Complex interpersonal conflicts between members
- Members sleeping or losing consciousness (on floors, tables, and in bathrooms)
- Disruptive smells (drugs, filth, human waste) and sounds (yelling, swearing)
- Aggressive behaviour including threats of violence and even murder
- Members carrying weapons like saws, axes, and machetes
- Members under the influence of alcohol and drugs, including opioids
- Substances and substance use materials on the ground and in the bathrooms
- Overdoses in and around the library (as many as six per day)
- Members entering the library with bleeding wounds, infectious conditions, and injuries
- Disgruntled members of the public who do not wish to encounter the above in their local public library (often families with young children)

These experiences are not exceptional, but often daily realities at HPL. Notably, most of the library members enduring homelessness and mental health difficulties are respectful, willing to comply with regulations, and making good use of the library's resources. Moreover, even where disruption arises, the etiology of these behaviours is firmly understood through a lens of social inequity rather than personal failing or malice. The situation in the library is generated by wider social crises in our neighborhoods, institutional supports, and communities.

What is the library doing to address these issues?

In response to rising social crises and resulting safety concerns, some libraries have turned to punitive measures of crisis management rooted in surveillance, stereotyping, and banning. However, these approaches may have the unintended consequence of further alienating already marginalized members. In contrast, other libraries have embraced harm reduction approaches rooted in flexibility, de-escalation, and expanded social services to reduce the reliance on exclusionary tactics. These tensions reflect broader ideological debates about whether libraries should be neutral public institutions or active participants in social justice advocacy. Library workers and leadership are caught in this debate, increasingly placed in ethically complex positions where they must balance institutional policies to keep their library safe for the public with professional commitments to inclusivity and accessibility for all.

HPL Central has been at the center of this impossible double bind. These tensions have been particularly salient this year (2025-2026) as the toxicity of Hamilton's opioid supply has been on the rise and as the city endured extreme temperatures during one of the city's coldest Winter seasons ever. Members of HPL's leadership are acutely aware that amid this changing urban context marked by social inequalities, libraries have become one of the last truly public spaces where people can seek refuge and access basic resources. In the wake of this social upheaval, some public libraries have expanded their staff to include individuals and organizations who can assist in fulfilling their expanded social roles. To this end, HPL central offers significant resourcing at its branch, including:

- On-site social workers
- On-site community connectors
- Employment related agencies (rotating community partner desk)
- Housing related agencies (rotating community partner desk)
- Health and medical related agencies (rotating community partner desk)
- Mental health related agencies (rotating community partner desk)
- Child, youth, and family related agencies (rotating community partner desk)
- Indigenous related agencies (rotating community partner desk)
- **Peer support workers**

HPL is resisting the attitude of abandonment espoused by governmental decision makers.

The inclusion of peer support workers at HPL Central represents a novel service provision in public libraries. While social workers are seeing increasing presence in libraries, peer support workers are an uncommon but essential addition to library teams. Through their partnership with McMaster's Community Research Platform, HPL Central introduced peers at their branch in 2025 and became a cutting-edge leader in social support innovation in libraries.

The Community Research Platform has facilitated an ethnographic investigation into the presence of peers at HPL Central. This work has demonstrated that peers improve overall library safety and community wellbeing. HPL invests significant resources into social service provision. Yet, with little external support, there are limits to the inclusivity that HPL can embrace when attempting to keep their members safe and their doors open to all members of the public.

How does peer support operate in the library?

In 2025, HPL Central adjusted its security budget to fund the integration of peer support workers into its space. The peers at HPL Central are seconded from the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) Hamilton Branch. The CMHA peers belong to an outreach team who provide peer support in community spaces such as shelters, encampments, cafes, and now libraries. The partnership between HPL and CMHA instantiates each of their ongoing commitments to meaningfully innovating infrastructures of care within the city of Hamilton.

Peer support workers are individuals with lived and living mental health and substance use experiences who provide emotional, social, and resource navigation support to others enduring similar challenges. They work in both clinical and community spaces and support individuals struggling with mental illness and addiction by modeling recovery and offering empathy from a place of shared experience and expert knowledge. Peers in this context often have additional, intersecting experiences of homelessness, poverty, violence, and incarceration that further extend their ability to relationally support community members living in contexts of precarity. There are myriad benefits to peer-based social support in the library:

- **Whereas** traditional institutional services can generate power imbalances with vulnerable communities... **peers** offer a non-hierarchical genre of care
- **Whereas** there are legacies of distrust between traditional institutional services and vulnerable communities... **peers** develop sustained and trusting relationships
- **Whereas** mental health, substance use, and housing supports can be opaque and bureaucratically complex to navigate... **peers** have an intimate familiarity with the barriers and facilitators to different resources, programs, and service offerings
- **Whereas** many vulnerable community members may be reluctant to seek help... **peers** serve as an essential bridge between people in need and necessary services
- **Whereas** vulnerable communities may feel socially and culturally misunderstood... **peers** have culturally and socially specific knowledge, language, and practice that they use to relate to others
- **Whereas** vulnerable communities can endure stigma and maltreatment in traditional institutional environments... **peers** bring a uniquely nonjudgmental and egalitarian attitude to their work
- **Whereas** institutional environments (e.g. medicine, law enforcement, and emergency medical services) can cause harm to vulnerable communities... **peers** foster environments that are non-threatening
- **Whereas** vulnerability and disenfranchisement can cause feelings of severe hopelessness... **peers** generate feelings of hope by modelling aspirational futures
- **Whereas** institutional expertise can overlook the lived realities of vulnerable communities... **peers** mobilize lived and living experience as a key source of expertise that differs from professional authority

This final point on lived and living experience is essential.

Peer support in public libraries: Summary of key early insights

Peers can explicitly share their lived mental health and substance use experiences to create a connection with library members in need (e.g. “I get it, I’ve been there, I was homeless too”). Yet, even when peers do not explicitly disclose their experiences, this lived expertise informs their interactions with members through mutual vulnerability, relatable advice, and patience.

Lived Experience	Examples
Shared language	Peers can use informal greetings (e.g. <i>brutha, bud, man, homie</i>) and terminology (e.g. related to using, substances, withdrawal, shelter life, street life) to relate to members in their own, socially relevant terms.
	Peers can offer insider insight into the language of library members. For instance, members in distress may say “I want to kill you.” While the library treats all threats as credible, peers have contextualized this language as a relatively benign expression of frustration on the streets.
Shared conduct	Peers will avoid keeping their hands in their pockets when interacting with members, since this stance can be perceived as threatening (e.g. concealing a weapon) and therefore may foster suspicion, distrust, or reactionary behavior among members.
	Peers will ask before touching the belongings of members, knowing that many people living in shelters and encampments have been victims of theft and have lost items of significance (personal belongings, identification, transportation).
Shared experience	Peers may explicitly share their lived and living experiences with members. For instance, a peer approached a member in distress who was frustrated by dealings with psychiatric and legal systems that he said were “treating him worse than an animal.” The peer empathized and shared a challenging psychiatric treatment experience they had endured, while also contextualizing why systems fail all kinds of people, and thus his difficulties were not a personal attack. This type of sharing often results in a sense of trust.
	Peers may implicitly use their lived experience to support members in need. For instance, one peer recalled constantly being “told to” rather than “asked to” do something when he was unhoused, which felt dehumanizing. The peer asks members who may not be following rules – rather than telling them – to change their behaviour. This approach typically results in thanks and positive outcomes.
Expert knowledge	Peers have insider knowledge that can protect the safety and wellbeing of members in need. For instance, a member working night shifts asked a peer to call his shelter and request daytime sleeping hours. The peer informed this member that if an exception were made for him, he would likely get “jumped” and attacked by others shelter residents. The peer worked with the member to find other sleep solutions.

It is significant that peers are *in* the library but not *of* the library – meaning they are situated within HPL, but they are CMHA employees. This liminal role enables peers to exist between lived experience and institutional authority. When they are providing support at HPL, peers are seen by members to exist outside the institutional framework of the library, which plays a significant role in facilitating trusting relationships between peers and members in need.

Peer support in public libraries: Summary of key early insights

How do the peers make a difference in the library?

Mental health is connected to many social realities like housing, employment, healthcare, criminalization, and interpersonal connection. When the peer workers support the mental health and wellbeing of library members in need, they create transformative change across all these domains. Below is an overview of some of the key ways that peers support vulnerable library members in need.

Support Type	Key Examples
Social support	Combatting loneliness: Many people in the community face social isolation. The peers regularly support members who indicate that the social connection received through this relationship is a vital source of connection. Peers also direct members to community events and resources where they can socialize and expand their networks of support.
	Fostering belonging: People living in contexts of precarity are especially vulnerable to social exclusion and stigma. This type of disenfranchisement worsens outcomes related to mental health and wellbeing. Peers offer members a sense of sustained belonging. For instance, they will remember details about a person's life and follow up with members about significant life events in a way that makes members feel embedded in relational support.
	Interpersonal mediation: Living in a context of precarity can strain and weaken a person's social bonds with family, friends, romantic partners, and colleagues. Peers help advise members on how to navigate difficulties with significant others in their lives and occasionally support mediated discussions between members their social networks.
Emotional support	Mental health: Many of the members that Peers support are enduring varying levels of mental health difficulties, from mild anxiety to severe psychosis. Peers connect with and offer mental health council to these members and can also refer these members for more intensive forms of care, treatment, and case management.
	Hope: Members indicate that the peers give them a sense of hope in several regards. For some, learning about the recovery stories of peers gives them hope for similar future mobility toward wellness, housing, and employment. For others, the regular connection with peers gives them a reason to get out of the house and aspire for better futures.
	Risk assessment: The peers in the library are trained to assess the risk of self-harm and suicide. This skill is essential because expressions of hopelessness (e.g. "I wish I would fall asleep and not wake up") can be misconstrued as suicidal intent/plans/means and therefore escalated to the level of crisis prematurely or unnecessarily.
Resourcing support	Housing: In addition to the large contingency of members who are unhoused, many others face related housing challenges like eviction, unsafe housing, and challenges within the shelter system. Peers assist members to explore housing options, secure housing, move from encampments to shelters, and from shelters to more permanent housing.

Peer support in public libraries: Summary of key early insights

	<p>Employment: Many library members in need are facing employment related challenges like unemployment or underemployment. Peers help members identify job opportunities, apply for jobs, or prepare for schooling that can lead to future employment opportunities.</p>
	<p>Financial assistance: Programs like Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) can be bureaucratically complex and difficult to navigate, which renders them inaccessible to many. Peers, who may have used these programs themselves, can help members navigate applications, re-applications, status changes, and assistance disruptions.</p>
	<p>Nourishment: Many members enduring circumstances of poverty report hunger and food insecurity. Peers regularly direct members to food programs, such as churches that offer weekly free lunches, community organizations that host free barbecues, and non-profit organizations that have meal donation programs.</p>
	<p>Necessities: Peers resource members with necessary items like clean socks, winter jackets, tents, adult briefs, and assistive devices. They are well connected to agencies and services where they can source these items for distribution. Moreover, they assist members with accessing hygiene services, like free laundry and showers.</p>
	<p>Appointments: Many of the library’s vulnerable members are navigating complex housing, legal, social service, and healthcare systems. The peers frequently assist members with managing their medical, legal, parole, and tenancy appointments. This includes making and rescheduling appointments, communicating with professionals and providers, getting people on waitlists, and helping people prepare statements for their appointments.</p>
	<p>Transportation: For people living in poverty and contexts of precarity, transportation can significantly hinder access to essential resources. Peers help members navigate public transit and can also occasionally offer free transit passes.</p>
	<p>Technology: Many vulnerable library members have limited or no access to essential technologies like telephones and computers, which hinders their ability not only for social connection but also for accessing resources and upward mobility. Peers assist members with technological needs, such as connecting people through social media, applying for jobs online, preparing and printing resumes, and applying for identification.</p>
<p>Crisis management</p>	<p>De-escalation: Moments of heightened emotion and escalation are common in the library. Peers are trained and highly skilled in addressing, diffusing, and even reversing moments of emotional intensity and escalation. Peers have also diffused this skill to colleagues through the delivery of de-escalation training available to all staff.</p>
	<p>Handling restrictions: Restrictions constitute a fixed period where a member is suspended from the library following bad behaviour. Restrictions can create interactions that are fraught, emotionally charged, and potentially violent. Peers are experts in negotiating these tensions with members – for instance ensuring that restricted members leave without causing a scene and return for reinstatement meetings.</p>

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	<p>Emergency services: Peers are experts in assessing when emergency services need to be called (e.g. paramedics for wound care, law enforcement for violence). This judgment prevents premature escalation, unnecessary encounters with institutional harm, and reduces visible library disruption.</p>
Substance use support	<p>Recovery: Peers support many members through various stages of substance use recovery. In some cases, they can provide personalized advice based on their own journeys of recovery. In other cases, they can connect library members with recovery programming and rehabilitative resources.</p>
	<p>Checking bathrooms: Bathrooms are common sites of substance as they are some of the few places where people can access privacy, especially in the colder months. Peers regularly monitor the bathrooms for signs of substance use and overdose and offer dignity to members in handling these cases while also ensuring the bathrooms are clean and safe for all.</p>
	<p>Limiting substance use: When the peers are on site and visible to the public, members report being less likely to use substances. Their presence alone limits the amount of substance use ongoing in and around the library.</p>
	<p>Risk assessment: Peers can assess whether a person who is under the influence of substances needs the administration of Narcan and emergency services. For instance, a peer may be able to tell from the hue of a person’s complexion whether they are at imminent risk for overdose, or whether their blood flow can be restored through other, harm reductive means.</p>
Policy support	<p>Language sensitivity: Prior to the peer’s presence in the library, “restrictions” were called “bans.” This language was deemed inflammatory because it indicates a permanent removal. The term “ban” was also identified by the peers to have associations with the loss of dignity. Therefore, they recommended the language of “restriction,” which appropriately suggests its temporary nature, and which has less punitive associations.</p>
	<p>Technology adoption: Given that there are both women’s and men’s bathrooms on all four library floors, it becomes impossible to always monitor people’s activities in these spaces. The peers suggested the adoption of a new technology that detects prolonged motionless occupancy – a sign of overdose risk. These radar sensors were tested for a trial period and eventually implemented across all floors.</p>

How does peer support compare to other public safety approaches?

One response to social crisis in public spaces like libraries has been the amplification of security presence. Security guards are increasingly employed in private and public sectors across North America. The security sector is fundamentally connected to systems of policing and carcerality – sometimes reproducing harms within these systems yet with fewer policies or provisional guidelines regulating their professional behaviour. While guards are more likely to rely on surveillance, coercion, and punitive logics, peers cultivate compassion, harm reduction, and de-escalation. These differences are not moral: rather, different institutional mandates and forms of professional expertise produce crisis management approaches that have diverging downstream consequences for people’s wellbeing. For example:

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- **Whereas** security assess a person’s alertness by yelling in their ear, potentially threatening their safety... **peers** enact watching and listening to determine a person’s state of alertness and safety.
- **Whereas** security may urgently outcast a member carrying but not using a substance use supply like a pipe... **peers** will respectfully ask that members put these materials away and do not take them out while in the library.
- **Whereas** security may immediately call law enforcement on a member who is deemed loud, disruptive, or suspicious... **peers** effectively check in with members to uncover what the problem may be, and to collaborate with members on a solution.

Peer Support Workers	Security Guards
Offering options	Presenting ultimatums
Negotiation	Escalation
Continued belonging	Forced expulsion
Assessing ambiguity in context	Converting ambiguity into emergency
Attending to embodied states	Disrupting embodied states
Recognizing the significance of risky practices and objects	Punitive judgment of risky practices and objects

Peer support workers ensure that libraries’ (which are limited public spaces) rules and policies are followed while preserving the dignity and wellbeing of its members. While security do offer material and symbolic forms of safety (e.g. their uniformed presence signals to the public and to staff that their safety is being taken seriously), teamwork between security guards and peer support workers is ideal. **Peers are not replaceable by other public safety workers.**

Who benefits from peer support in the library?

Members in need: Above we detailed how members in need are the beneficiaries of peer support in the library. However, it is not members alone who benefit from peer presence.

Library staff: Library staff report that peer support workers have been an essential addition to their team. Yet, staff also report that they desire increased peer presence, given that peers are only occasionally stationed at the library. Library staff can devote more time to their roles – and feel safer while performing these roles – when peers are present.

Wider community: HPL is a hub for the entire Hamilton community. Yet, many residents, families, and youth report feeling uncomfortable entering a space that is inculcated in such visible social crisis. Peers create less tumultuous environments in the library, which renders it a safer, more comfortable, and more accessible space for the public to visit.

The library as a public space: Peer support workers help libraries manage between the needs of the general public and the needs of its vulnerable constituents. Therefore, peer presence is a critical bridge in addressing one of the key tensions that libraries face in the current social landscape.

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What gaps need to be immediately filled?

The peer workers have built lasting, meaningful relationships with library members in need of support. Using a wealth of community mental health expertise and drawing from lived and living experience enables peers to use relational approaches to care provision that are embedded foremost in compassion, trust, and shared understanding.

The peer support workers at HPL Central are experts in managing public safety, ensuring that library rules are being followed, while also prioritizing the wellbeing of members enduring difficulties. As people living in precarity increasingly spend time in libraries, peer support workers are an essential resource for ensuring that all members of the public can have a safe and open place to visit. However, peers have limited presence in the library due to resource constraints, and as a result peer support workers are overextended. There is an urgent need for timely and robust investment into peer support outside of clinics and in the community.

Day	Peer presence	Peer absence	Implication
Mon	9:00am–4:00pm	4:00pm–8:00pm	- Significant gaps in social service in the afternoon and evenings
Tues	9:00am–12:00pm	12:00pm–8:00pm	
Wed	9:00am–12:00pm	12:00pm–8:00pm	- When peers have off-site obligations or take sick/personal/vacation days, the library is left with limited social support
Thurs	9:00am–4:00pm	4:00pm–8:00pm	
Fri	9:00am–12:00pm	12:00pm–6:00pm	- When peers return from time off, they are overrun with requests for support
Sat	9:00am–4:00pm	4:00pm–5:00pm	
Sun	N/A	All day*	

*The library has since closed on Sundays, in large part due to the shortage of social supports in place on this day

The reliance on HPL as mental health space reflects broader systemic failures in providing accessible and equitable care to the Hamilton community. Libraries like HPL Central are filling gaps left behind by governments and others public institutions. In light of HPL’s commitment to equity and access amid fraying social services, they are in need of substantial and sustainable support to fulfill this role.

McMaster’s Community Research Platform, The Canadian Mental Health Association, and The Hamilton Public Library support a call to action for increased investment into peer support services throughout the city of Hamilton, particularly in key sites like the Hamilton Public Library’s Central branch.