

A business plan for an alternative Australian mental health support system.

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Revision Note

Version 4 of this plan is a complete rewrite following more than 12 months discussions of previous plans with input from many people including Australian and International Lived Experience Workers (LEWs).

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**A Pink Panther
Movement
Initiative...**

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1. Purpose

This plan is designed to:

- Inspire and guide Lived Experience Workers (LEWs), also commonly known as peer workers to take an active role in developing community-based mental health co-operatives in their own areas.
- Provide a clear, workable plan for developing the Deakin Community Mental Health Co-operative operating in Melbourne outer eastern suburbs. The setting up, development and running of this cooperative is intended as a model that others can reference, adapt and follow.

2. The Problem and the Solution

Mental health services in Australia are dominated by the biomedical model. They are often expensive, difficult to access, fragmented, and disconnected from the communities they serve. Lived experience workers (LEWs) bring empathy, authenticity, and hope grounded in their own recovery. When trained and experienced LEWs come together through a co-operative style organisation, they can create a service and support structure that is democratic, empowering, cost effective and meets the needs of their local communities.

3. Why A Co-Operative

In various discussions with LEW's, a common complaint is that they are frequently exploited and/or discriminated against by other "higher status" mental health workers. A worker owned co-operative turns the situation around since the cooperative is owned and run by LEWs who set their own terms and conditions.

Some sort of structure is also obviously required for the practical day to day running of any organisation. This structure needs to be an incorporated body to provide legal protection for its members. Ideally it also needs to be reasonably easy and inexpensive to set up.

A co-operative meets all these requirements while providing an effective means for Lived Experience Workers to have full control over their own work environment as well as freedom from outside interference as they engage in the important and much needed job of providing non clinical mental health services to the community.

4. Becoming a Peer Worker

At the heart of community mental health cooperatives are **peer workers**. They are people who use their own lived experience of mental health challenges to walk beside others on their recovery journey.

It's not about being "cured" or "fixed." It's about **sharing hope, humanity, and hard-won insight** in ways that help others find their own strength.

Becoming a peer worker is part of an ongoing recovery process. With the right support and reflection, anyone who's been through tough times can grow into this role.

4.1 Are You Ready to Be a Peer Worker?

You may be ready — or getting close — if you:

- **Can look after your own wellbeing** and know what helps you stay balanced.
- **Can share your experiences safely**, without being pulled back into distress.
- **Use your story to support others**, rather than to seek support for yourself.
- **Keep healthy boundaries** and understand the difference between friendship and support work.
- **Listen with empathy and without judgment**, even when someone's path looks different from yours.
- **Work well with others**, including peer and professional teams, and are open to learning.
- **Believe in recovery and self-determination**, seeing every person as capable of change and growth.

If you're not quite there yet, that's okay — **readiness is something that grows over time**.

Volunteering, training, or joining a peer-led group can be great ways to build confidence and skills.

4.2 Qualifications and Skills

Essential skills include communication, teamwork, and reflective practice.

Formal training such as Certificate IV in Mental Health Peer Work (CHC43515) is recommended as a good starting point. Additional low cost training using a **Recovery College** approach is in the pipeline. This will address specific skill areas, particularly where satisfactory training in these areas is either not available or is prohibitively expensive.

Relevant work experience is considered very important. Unfortunately it can be very difficult for lived experience workers to gain access to it in the current environment. It is expected to become easier as more LEW co-ops are established.

5. Getting Started

If you are an experienced or aspiring peer worker (see 4.1) then these are the steps that you could follow to get started and eventually establish a mental health co-operative in your own area.

1. Contact local organisations for support.
2. Find a regular meeting space. Ideally this should be a place that is free or inexpensive.
3. Promote meetings through flyers, community radio stations, social media and the like.
4. Listen to people's needs and aspirations.
5. Share and discuss this communication with other interested LEW people and use it to develop and expand the co-op one step at a time.

It is probably also a very good idea to contact us and establish contact with others who are looking at doing the same thing.

6. Establishing a Co-operative

Five committed members are required to form a co-op. Each state has its own registration procedure which are all very similar. Look up the registration process for your state. It is highly recommended that you stick to the standard (default) set of rules. The standard rules are well thought out and should meet the needs of most co-operatives. If you stick to these standard rules you do not need to engage the services of a lawyer or any other professional. Standard rules also help to avoid unforeseen complications further down the track. The registration process should be quite straight forward and free help is available, if required, from various free online resources.

Members of a worker co-operative are both the owners and employees of the co-operative. The co-operative provides work and a "fair deal" for its members. The members elect a board of directors from amongst themselves who are responsible for the day to day running of the organisation. All active members have an equal say in the running of the organisation as well as an equal vote at a general meetings regardless of their shareholding.

From the five or more founding members, it will be necessary to elect a Chairperson, Secretary and Treasurer. Other founding members could become board members if that is what they want and the majority are agreeable to that arrangement.

The next step would be to raise the necessary amount of seed money to register the cooperative.

The registration costs involved are similar in each state. For example, in Victoria, an application for approval of a name and rules for a non-distributing cooperative costs \$92.50, plus a \$37.00 fee to register the cooperative.

Once the co-op is registered, open a bank account. Then raise some more seed money to set up a simple website and start offering the co-operative's first peer service to the community. This first service will be one that you have decided is needed, important and realistically achievable.

Initially the Cooperative will probably work on a part time basis using volunteer services but as it becomes established, LEW workers could expect to receive fair and reasonable payment for their services. While everyone needs to be able to earn a reasonable living the main purpose of establishing a co-op is to **work in the industry with dignity and respect and make a worthwhile positive difference to other people's lives.**

Remember to Keep It Simple and just take one step at a time. Fully consolidate each step before moving on to the next one. Don't attempt to engage in empire building. Allow your co-operative to grow naturally and organically to suit the needs of your community.

7. Programs and Services

There is a wide range of non clinical programs and services that peer workers can offer. They can also network with other community services and professionals if that is what is needed. Start small with one needed service that can practically be provided—like a peer group, recovery education workshop, or supported volunteering. Expand as capacity grows, guided by community feedback.

8. Funding and Finance

Funding can come from affordable user fees, NDIS, grants, fundraising, and donations. Keep accounting simple and transparent. Report annually to members.

Start setting up basic admin and financial systems to keep track of money and time spent by LEW people and any others who are involved in the startup (Use Excel spread sheets etc initially until we see where we are going)

It will be necessary to submit an annual report each financial year. The cost to submit an annual report for a small co-operative in Victorian \$92.50. It will be similar in other states.

How much can a LEW expect to earn once the business is up and running?

The average casual wage for service industry workers in Australia as at August 2024 is around **\$33-\$36 per hour**. Once the co-operative is established and operational, entry level wages for suitably qualified LEW's could be expected to be in this range with increased rates for experience and seniority.

Mental health is, or at least should be, first and foremost about helping people. Nobody is suggesting that LEWs should not be reasonably paid for their efforts but if making money is your primary goal, it is respectfully suggested that mental health is probably not your field. You should perhaps be looking for a job in finance, investment or banking which is much more focused on money.

It is also worth keeping in mind that this type of business will need to run with a reasonable safety margin of profit. The LEW owner-workers are the ones who will manage the business and set prices, wages and profit margins.

8.1 Systemic problems and attitudes towards money.

We could engage in a long and complex discussion about wages, workers rights, conditions, etc but that is not going to help us deal with the immediate problem of trying to improve Australia's mental health system.

Leaders and decision makers in the mental health industry currently are amongst the top 1% of income earners in Australia. This income structure is at least a part of the present problem that locks Australia and many other parts of the world into a conservative system of mental health that is highly resistant to reform and has been described as not fit for purpose.

People who are doing very well out of an existing system obviously have no motivation to want to change the way things are and they will simply rationalise away any malpractices or other wrong doings.

An important point to keep in mind with setting up and running a co-operative is that some LEWs may very well become the leaders of a new and very different mental health movement in this country. They will be responsible for establishing and maintaining a different culture within an organisation that they own and manage. If this new culture is one of genuine caring and compassion then the type of mental health reforms that many are currently looking for will hopefully evolve over time and permeate the larger community. On the other hand, if the culture is allowed to become self serving and driven by greed, control and lust for power, some mental health services may change in nature but overall we will still have a system with the same sorts of issues and problems that we currently have

9. Promoting the Co-op in the Community

Share real stories of recovery. Use social media, local press, and events to promote awareness. Partner with other community organisations and educational institutions.

10. Networking with Other Community MH Co-ops

Collaborate with other co-ops for training, mentoring, and resource sharing. Example: Lamp Inc (WA), which demonstrates how local governance and lived experience leadership can create sustainable mental health support.

11. Sustainability and Growth

Encourage shared leadership to prevent burnout. Build a pipeline of new peer workers through mentoring and training. Document learning and create templates for others to use.

12. Conclusion



The Pink Panther Movement

*"Standing Up for
Mental Health Reform"*

<https://PinkPantherActivists.au>

The Deakin Community Mental Health Co-operative aims to demonstrate that people with lived experience can lead meaningful change. By working together, peer workers can create a new kind of service culture—one based on equality, understanding, and hope.