



# **Embedding Lived Experience, Safety and Support into Workplace Policy**

A Summary Report on Collaborative Policy Implementation  
March 2026



where harm reduction works

Author: Laura Cartwright, Program Coordinator  
SAFER Knowledge Translation and Exchange  
[laura.cartwright@avi.org](mailto:laura.cartwright@avi.org)

## PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report documents the collaborative process used to develop a practical workflow tool to support the implementation of a ‘ready to work’ (R2W) policy at AVI Health and Community Services (AVI). It may be of interest to individuals and organizations in the social services sector seeking to create safer and inclusive workspaces.

The report describes how an interdisciplinary staff team at AVI, with representation from all staffing levels, worked together through a commitment to equitable policy implementation:

- People with Lived Experience (PWLE) – also referred to as Experiential Workers (EWs) – provided invaluable information on improving working conditions and advocating for more equitable and inclusive organizational policy.
- Program managers and coordinators shared their leadership experiences including efforts to minimize harm while supporting a diverse staff cohort and the realities of implementing workplace policy. Senior leadership (e.g. directors) contributed their perspectives on organizational culture, capacity, opportunities and constraints.

Through this report, the author shares the process behind creating the R2W workflow via a uniquely equitable approach that could be adapted to other administrative and human resource matters. The R2W workflow follows the destigmatizing approach of the R2W policy and suggests implementation of policy be compassionate and humane throughout.

## BACKGROUND

AVI recognizes employees with lived experience carry expertise that is a significant asset and integral to the organization’s mission. One of AVI’s strategic goals is to “centre people with lived experience in organizational planning, program design, service provision, and evaluation,” with an identified organizational value of “cultivating a workplace which promotes wellness and meaning.”

In 2023, AVI implemented a [Ready to Work employee policy](#), utilizing a harm reduction approach to provide clear direction on expectations of employee readiness to perform their job duties. The policy empowers managers and other leaders to make real-time decisions, including asking a staff member to leave a shift if their behaviour is incongruent with the work environment, distracting, disruptive, or unsafe. Similarly, staff may request to leave a shift if they do not feel ready to work. Effort is made to uphold staff agency and autonomy.

The policy was developed to promote safety for both staff and clients and to support ethical service delivery. However, leadership found it challenging to implement the policy in a trauma-informed

manner while maintaining uninterrupted service delivery in dynamic, sometimes acute care and crisis-response settings. Balancing priorities in these sensitive environments proved nuanced and complex.

## NEEDS ASSESSMENT: POLICY INTO PRACTICE

When faced with complex staffing situations, AVI program managers expressed a need for clarity and guidance on how to implement the R2W policy in practice. They wanted to ensure the process was trauma-informed, minimized harm, and maintained clear safety boundaries for staff and clients. Senior leadership wanted frontline staff to feel safe and supported, and they wanted managers to feel similarly safe and supported when needing to set appropriate boundaries with staff on their teams. EWs also wanted to ensure that decisions were made thoughtfully and equitably.

There was a clear need for further guidance to help both managers and staff navigate the nuance of determining readiness to work. The author of this report, a Program Coordinator with AVI's [SAFER Knowledge Translation & Exchange](#) (SAFER KTE) team, was well positioned to lead this work. The primary focus of the SAFER KTE team is to support capacity building for Prescribed Alternatives (PA) programs, with a strong commitment to the ethical inclusion of PWLE and the principle of "[Nothing About Us Without Us](#)." This principle has informed previous work, including a [concept mapping study](#) conducted to guide the development of AVI's PA programming. SAFER KTE works to support new and existing programs in creating healthy, safe working environments where participants are well served by diverse staff. These staff are seen as relatable, relevant, and reassuring by clients—and as integral and valued by coworkers and leadership. SAFER KTE also supported the establishment of an EW community of practice at AVI, and this group was mobilized to co-create the R2W policy guidance.

## OVERVIEW OF COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

The Program Coordinator reviewed the existing R2W policy and shared it with EWs employed in AVI PA programs across Vancouver Island. The policy was also shared with site managers during virtual meetings. Both groups were given the opportunity to review the policy and raise suggestions, concerns, or questions. Their feedback highlighted the need for additional clarity around several issues and processes; specifically, they recommended creating a workflow to accompany the policy. A meeting was also held with program managers and senior leadership.

A R2W workflow was drafted over a three-month period with contributions from EWs and program managers and was then presented to senior leadership who provided additional input and ultimately approved the document for implementation.

## REFLECTIONS ON COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

### EXPERIENTIAL WORKERS

When meeting with members of the EW community of practice the Program Coordinator relied on guidance provided by the BC Campus [10 Recommendations for Peer Engagement and Consultation](#).

During their review of the R2W policy and later when helping to shape the accompanying workflow, EWs made vital contributions. Their input ensured a person-centred, trauma-informed approach and supported a more lateral power dynamic between leadership and employees—one that better respects employees' value, independence, and autonomy. For example, they shared valuable perspectives on how to approach staff who may be struggling with readiness to work. EWs also raised the converse scenario: a staff member recognizing that they themselves are not ready to work and wishing to voice this without fear of recourse or stigma. They recommended that managers honour such self-assessments, allow staff to leave when needed, and offer support upon request. This recommendation was included in the Workflow, along with the expectation that the approach be cooperative, grounded in proactive communication, and non-punitive. The resulting Workflow reinforces the importance of recognizing and respecting employee agency.

EWs noted that the rigors of the work can hit hard for staff who come from the same communities as the clients they serve. Given these realities, and the intersecting issues of criminalization, stigma, housing and food insecurity, and racism, experiential staff may require more nuanced consideration and support from their employer. They also emphasized the mental-health impacts of the work and recommended that staff be provided appropriate resources and support and be permitted to step away from duties to maintain wellness—without stigma or negative consequences.

### MANAGERS, COORDINATORS AND SENIOR LEADERSHIP

AVI leadership staff identified several concerns and challenges when it came to staffing dynamic programs where safety is paramount, while also supporting staff through the lenses of harm reduction, equity and inclusion.

- Inconsistent approaches with staff supervision (e.g. experiential workers vs non-experiential workers) can create tension within the team.
- Managers were aware of the financial impact of asking a staff member to leave their shift due to lack of readiness to work, and the possibility of isolating or stigmatizing a staff member who was sent home.

- It may be difficult to address staff behaviour that indicates a lack of readiness to work, even when the behaviour affected service quality or the safety and comfort of staff and clients. Addressing problematic behaviour during acute or fast-paced situations requires balancing staff support with safety and service integrity. In some cases, removing a staff member could risk triggering a service closure due to minimum-staffing requirements and a limited casual workforce.
- Managers emphasized their desire to address staff with compassion and respect while minimizing disruptions for the individual, the team, and service users. They also wanted reassurance that Directors and Human Resources would support their decisions when implementing the R2W Policy.

AVI leadership staff affirmed that the R2W policy supports a consistent, non-stigmatizing approach by focusing on behaviour and expectations rather than personal characteristics, supporting safe, ethical service while maintaining compassion for staff. They emphasized the need for a clear workflow to operationalize the policy, giving managers flexibility to respond appropriately (e.g. offering time to talk, take a break, or leave a shift), provide clear resources, and have assurance that their decisions would be supported by colleagues and supervisors.

## R2W WORKFLOW

The R2W workflow is a step-by-step guide designed to clarify and operationalize the R2W policy. It provides practical steps to using a mindful approach that requires assessing safety for both staff and clients. It encourages firsthand observation, trauma-informed practice, and contextual awareness. The workflow recommends that, when possible, managers approach staff who present with signs of non-readiness for work by offering basic supports such as nutrition, an opportunity for emotional regulation, and practical problem-solving, before considering any disciplinary process, which should be used only as a last resort.

Following shared discussion and input from EWs and AVI leadership staff, the R2W workflow was presented at a final working group meeting for approval. It was then shared with AVI human resources staff and the Senior Director for approval. The R2W policy is accessible to all AVI staff, while the R2W workflow and accompanying infographic are provided to managers and coordinators as implementation tools.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Investing time in inclusive, multi-contributor processes results in more ethical and contextually relevant policies and procedures. People benefit from being heard and from collaborating on matters that directly affect their working environment. Providing opportunities for individual input and small working groups, culminating in a collective forum, fosters transparency, equity, and workplace wellness. Workplaces that prioritize psychological safety are more likely to experience improved functionality and collaboration.

The author recommends expanding opportunities for communication and feedback from EWs and frontline staff more broadly. For example, interdisciplinary staff working groups, including direct service employees and leadership, could be established to discuss, evaluate and implement organizational policy and practice.

Other recommendations for collaborative, interdisciplinary policy development and implementation:

- Center the voices, perspectives, and input of Experiential Workers.
- Prioritize engagement with and guidance from Indigenous communities and organizations.
- Create or adapt policies and procedures based on observation, reporting, and analysis of work practices, with meaningful input from EWs, LGBTQ2S+ staff, BIPOC staff. This approach supports relevance, inclusivity, and stronger outcomes.
- Allocate time and human resources to support engagement opportunities from a variety of staff roles. For example, build time into schedules so that managers have the opportunity to observe frontline work; make time for mutual (manager/worker) capacity check-ins; and provide opportunities for feedback via surveys and employee reviews.
- Engage EWs, staff, and managers both separately and collectively, ensuring ethical oversight, documentation, and appropriate use of information gathered. Ensure contributors have opportunities to share perspectives in their own words.
- Regularly review policies and procedures for relevance to current contexts—such as the drug poisoning and housing crises—and embed recommendations from staff at all levels, including EWs.

## CONCLUSION

The process of creating the R2W workflow was intentional and inclusive. It transformed what could have been a control-oriented process into a collaborative one. Balancing boundaries, expectations, equality, and inclusion need not be difficult when those most affected are meaningfully involved in shaping solutions. It is essential to elevate the voices of EWs, frontline staff, and supervisors to organizational decision-makers. While such efforts may improve productivity and outcomes, their greater value lies in cultivating empowered staff, higher job satisfaction, and safer workplaces.

Organizations responding to social crises operate under persistent urgency. Competition for funding can create pressure to advance programs quickly, sometimes at the expense of preparation, while acuity demands immediacy. It is therefore critical to periodically reflect on what may be missing, overlooked, or altered over time.

Organizations must ask:

*What injustices or imbalances are we seeking to address?*

*How do we ensure we do not compromise our original intention - to support people in times of struggle - while continuing to speak truth to power?*

The answers lie in collaborative processes which mitigate the power imbalance in our organizations and prioritizes experiential knowledge in all policy, practice and program development.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank the managers and directors from the Prescribed Alternative sites of AVI who contributed to the creation of the workflow.

Extra special thanks to Luke Solyon and Jon Ritchie, from AVI Nanaimo for their edifying and invaluable contributions to the workflow and for educating all of us on best practices.

**For more information about AVI's Ready-To-Work policy and workflow,  
please contact [info@avi.org](mailto:info@avi.org)**