Discussion Item: Peer Voices Roundtable Summary

Eight peer support specialists participated in a roundtable discussion to explore how lived experiences can be leveraged to enhance San Diego's behavioral health system. The participants represented a range of services, including substance use disorder programs such as the McAllister Institute for Treatment and Education, mental health programs such as SchooLink Outpatient, hospital-based programs such as San Diego Relay, and peer-led initiatives including the NAMI Peer Council.

Throughout the discussion, participants shared insights across several areas, including the continuum of care, peer and community engagement, workforce challenges, peer roles, and housing support. This summary highlights their perspectives in response to a series of guiding questions, emphasizing opportunities, challenges, and recommendations for improving behavioral health services.

Question 1: What strengths do peer workers bring to the behavioral health system?
Peers use their lived experience to build trust, reduce stigma, and increase client engagement. They help clients feel understood, foster open communication, and improve outcomes such as reduced hospitalizations and substance use. Peers are especially valuable in crisis and case management teams, where they serve as critical bridges to clinical services.

Question 2: What are some of the biggest barriers you've seen to accessing consistent behavioral health care, and how can peer support specialists help individuals navigate or overcome these challenges?
Barriers such as long wait times, transportation challenges, fear, and stigma often prevent people from accessing care. Peers help individuals overcome these obstacles by providing emotional support, advocacy, and system navigation. Their consistent presence builds trust and helps connect clients to basic needs, medications, and long-term behavioral health services.

Question 3: In your current role, what opportunities exist for you to provide meaningful feedback and participate in planning efforts within your program?
Peers actively contribute to program planning, training, and feedback processes. However, challenges such as role ambiguity, burnout, and productivity demands limit their impact. Participants recommended structured supervision, peer-to-peer support, and professional development to strengthen and sustain the workforce.

Question 4: What types of training or support have helped you achieve meaningful involvement in your role, and what additional resources or opportunities would you like to see offered for future peer development?

Training in leadership, advocacy, and system navigation were mentioned as valuable, while mentorship and internships help build confidence and skills. Participants highlighted the need to expand certification programs, paid internships, and advanced training in facilitation, clinical skills, and wellness support. Sustaining the workforce will require ongoing professional development and retention-focused strategies.

Question 5: Given the link between housing and behavioral health recovery, what are some of the ways peer workers can support individuals in navigating housing systems?

Peers support by assisting with housing applications, documentation, and advocacy with housing processes. They also provide emotional support during transitions and help clients overcome barriers such as deposits or credit requirements. Peer-led housing and respite programs were seen as critical to promoting stability and reducing hospitalizations.