

# New York City's Wounded Healers

## Findings from a Study of Credible Messengers

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### PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

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PAR is a type of community-engaged method that understands that **lived experience is just as valuable to a research team as standard academic credentials.**

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Two things that **differentiate PAR** from other community-engaged methods are (1) its requirement to include people closest to the topic of study as **members of the research team**, and (2) its explicit **goal for action.**

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PAR is central to our **research ethics** and provides **context for the study's findings.** By using PAR, we were able to work with CMs as research partners, learn from their insight, and build trust with stakeholders in New York City. The CMs shaped all aspects of our project, from research design and data collection to product dissemination. Our findings are more **accurate and contextualized** because of this approach.

*Rod Martinez and Mari McGilton are co-lead authors of this fact sheet.*

Credible messengers (CMs) are people with lived experience, typically in the criminal legal system, who have transformed their lives to become agents of change in their communities. They leverage their experiences, expertise, and connections to help others transform their own lives and communities.

With funding and support from the New York City Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity (NYC Opportunity), the Urban Institute **studied and documented the evidence base on the use of CMs in human services, the historical and systemic contexts surrounding their work, and the current landscape of CMs in New York City.** Our team used a participatory action research (PAR) approach, hiring four CMs and training them as researcher assistants. Together, we **conducted a cross-program qualitative landscape scan to shed light on the meaning of and terms around "credible messengers" and "lived experience"; to learn more about recruitment, training, and qualifications of CMs as well as the needs and challenges of CMs and the organizations that employ them; and to explore collaborative efforts throughout New York City.** We collaborated with city-level stakeholders, community-based organizations, and CMs across the city to understand their perspectives and experiences regarding CMs and their work. We also sought their recommendations for how the city's policies and practices could better meet the needs of CMs and the communities they serve.

### PERCEIVED SUCCESSES OF CREDIBLE MESSENGERS

**They facilitate individual and community healing, empowerment, and capacity building.** Participants said CMs help reduce contact between police and their communities by providing alternative prevention strategies to address harm and violence. CMs mentor and empower people who are vulnerable to criminal legal contact and give them the support, tools, and resources they need to thrive.

**They create connections between communities, systems, and policymakers.** Participants said CMs engage different stakeholders, acting as bridges between community-based organizations, community members, agencies, and policymakers.

**They reshape ideas of public safety.** Working outside the criminal legal system, participants said that CMs show the public how community members can take care of each other without relying on police, prisons, and other carceral institutions.

**They raise awareness of structural and systemic oppression.** Participants reported that CMs teach their communities about the root causes of criminalization and mass imprisonment and make people more conscious of shared experiences and systemic oppression.

## **PERCEIVED CHALLENGES OF CREDIBLE MESSENGERS**

**Low pay and lack of benefits.** Participants reported that CMs are not paid a living wage, rarely receive raises, are typically paid less than their non-CM counterparts (e.g., social workers, case managers), and are not given benefits like health insurance, paid time off, and retirement investments.

**Funding barriers.** Participants reported funding sources mostly from New York City agencies. However, they also receive funding from federal and philanthropic sources. They named four barriers: (1) lack of funding for small organizations embedded in the communities they serve; (2) strict contract requirements limiting the use of funds to build organizational capacity; (3) performance and evaluation measures that do not accurately capture organizations' work; and (4) the amount of time taken to execute funding, which cripples small organizations.

**Stigma.** Participants stressed that racism, capitalism, and trauma all continuously marginalize CMs and their work. Because CMs are predominantly Black and Latinx people with criminal convictions, they face limited opportunities in areas such as employment and education and face challenging work environments. With that, they typically have compounded trauma as a result of their marginalization and system contact that is challenging to cope with while serving others who experience similar traumas.

**Workplace culture.** Participants said there is often a mismatch between CMs' mission and values and the workplace cultures of organizations that employ them. Traditional workplace cultures can be antithetical to relating to marginalized populations. It can be challenging for CMs to acquire the technological and administrative skills these cultures require.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT AND CAPACITY BUILDING IN CREDIBLE MESSENGER WORK**

**Increase pay, benefits, and supports for CMs.** Participants said CMs need career ladders and their pay needs to be raised to a living wage equal to their non-CM counterparts. They also said CMs (just like all people) need access to affordable health care and retirement benefits.

**Increase flexible funding for capacity building within and between organizations.** Participants need more diverse funding streams and the flexibility to use funds for training, professional development, collaboration, hiring, and technology.

**Reduce the time it takes to execute funding to organizations.** Participants suggested eliminating unnecessary steps to streamline and reduce contract processing time.

**Introduce alternative and healing-based forms of evaluation and performance measurement.** Participants said outcomes beyond recidivism, violations, and dosage need to be used for impact evaluations and performance measurements. Examples of outcomes might include school attendance, physical and mental health and well-being, costs saved by diverting people from system involvement, and measures of individuals' and communities' upward mobility.

**Ensure the purpose of the work is driving organizations' structures and processes.** Participants stressed the importance of rooting CMs' work in the movement's radical origins as a transformative justice approach. They said organizations need to maintain workplace structures and processes that support the unique needs of the populations they employ.

**Be more inclusive of people with lived experience in all areas.** Participants said people with lived experience need to be incorporated in roles and fields they have been historically excluded from, such as contract development, policy, education, and research.