

Lived Experience Statement

English Version



Richtungswechsel's Lived Experience Statement V1.0 2026



Tamara Höfer
Founder &
Managing Director

Founder's Statement – Tamara Höfer, MSc BSc (Hons)

"Richtungswechsel (German: 'Change of direction') signifies a paradigm shift in societal perceptions regarding incarceration, detention, and accountability. The name reflects a conscious shift in perspective towards the future. A future guided by social responsibility and human relationships, fostering a society where individuals can progress towards a life free of crime.

For this purpose, I am proud of introducing this statement on our dedication and commitment when it comes to lived experience of the criminal legal system.

Our work has only just begun, but we are moving in the right direction."

"There is no criminology without criminals."

— Paula Harriott (2024)

"Nothing about us without us."

— UNCRPD

"Criminology's debt to criminals."

— Rod Earle (2018)

Introduction

At Richtungswechsel, we wholeheartedly value diverse perspectives and lived experiences of any kind, particularly of those with lived experience of incarceration. Resonating strongly with the quotes before, we believe that true inclusion is fundamental to building a more equitable and effective criminal justice system. That is why we are committed to actively incorporate people with lived experience (PWLE) and expertise in a long-term, sustainable way within our work and the criminal justice system at large through our engagement framework (see [Lived Experience Engagement Framework](#), p.3f.) .

We are consistently working towards reaching out and making our support accessible, ensuring that individuals with lived experience have clear avenues to make a tangible difference with us. While our scope is focused on collaborative partnerships and professional support, we warmly invite people with lived experience to contribute their invaluable insights and help shape a more just future.

Founder and Managing Director

This statement represents our foundational commitment to integrating the invaluable insights of individuals with lived experience into the criminal justice system. It serves as a clear declaration of our dedication to inclusion and equity, providing a framework for how we approach engagement and inviting collaborative partnerships and professional support where unique perspectives can directly influence our work. Rather than a guarantee of immediate systemic change, it is a pledge to work towards it collaboratively, embodying a genuine and sustained effort to embed lived experience into our organisational fabric, rather than being a mere token gesture.

Our Commitment to Meaningful Participation

Real and meaningful inclusion must begin with co-creation. It cannot be added at the end of a project, treated as consultation after decisions have already been made, or reduced to a request for personal stories. For Richtungswechsel, meaningful participation means involving people with lived experience from the earliest stages of thinking, planning, designing, delivering, reviewing, and leading our work.

We therefore encourage the involvement of people with lived experience as contributors, volunteers, employees, advisors, facilitators, speakers, researchers, and collaborators. As part of a fair and ethical approach to engagement, we are committed to recognising people's time, labour, knowledge, and expertise. This includes fair compensation for people who are invited to speak, advise, conduct workshops, host events, contribute to organisational strategy, or take part in programme design and delivery.

We also recognise that participation requires support. Where possible, Richtungswechsel will provide practical assistance to enable people with lived experience to take part in events, meetings, consultations, projects, and organisational activities. This may include onboarding, training, mentoring, role preparation, and support to build the skills and confidence required for current or future roles.

Our Commitment to Meaningful Participation (cont.)

Richtungswechsel acknowledges the ethical dimensions of lived experience work. Nobody owes us, our organisation, or society their story. Lived experience should never be demanded, extracted, or treated as a condition of participation. We reject any approach that requires people to repeatedly disclose painful experiences in order to be heard, believed, or included.

At the same time, we wish to invite, encourage, understand, and support people with lived experience beyond tokenism. We reject the view that people with lived experience are merely subjects of research, sources of testimony, or symbolic representatives of a wider group. Instead, we seek to create spaces where voices that have too often been silenced, dismissed, or made invisible can contribute to knowledge, leadership, policy, practice, and social change on their own terms.

We do not view lived experience expertise as a “nice-to-have” addition to our work. We seek to centre our design, strategy, and practice around realities grounded in lived experience and lived personhood. This means moving beyond feedback on the existing system and its challenges. It means working with lived experience experts to imagine, design, and build more inclusive, accountable, and just responses for a shared future. If you want to learn more about our distinctions, please refer to the final section on [‘What is Lived Experience and What is Lived Experience Expertise?’ p.5.](#)

Founders and Managing

We recognise the weight, complexity, and specificity that each lived experience carries. For this reason, we welcome ideas, critique, leadership, and imagination from lived experience experts. Their contribution is not supplementary to justice reform; it is central to the possibility of reform that is ethical, democratic, and grounded in reality.

In guiding this work, Richtungswechsel draws on the universal principles of *Penal Reform International’s* [ten-point plan](#), developed through its work in Armenia, Indonesia, and Uganda, as a framework for ethical and meaningful engagement. We use these principles to help safeguard the dignity, safety, agency, and interests of all stakeholders, particularly those whose knowledge and experiences have historically been excluded from justice-related decision-making.

Lived Experience Engagement Framework

1. **Authority and choice of PWLE:** This means recognising and upholding the epistemic authority of the PWLE, understanding that we are not entitled to (know) their stories, and safeguarding the autonomy of the PWLE to decide when, whether, how much, how to share their lived experience narratives. We do not wish to put the onus of explanation about the justice system on PWLE but invite participation on their own terms.
2. Creating **safe and non-judgmental space** for narratives, suggestions, changes on one’s own terms and making sure not to commodify stories of Lived Experience. This also includes physical safety, consent/dissent to record, anonymity, confidentiality and equitable seating arrangements that do not single-out PWLE as different or “experts”. By using participatory methodologies, we invite active participation from PWLE as and to whatever extent they see fit.
 - a. Such spaces are shaped by trauma-informed (Hickle, n.d.), post-incarceration syndrome-sensitive practices (Alessi-Friedlander et. al. 2024) and gender-sensitive approaches encouraging collaborative learning, starting with check-ins. PWLE may be accompanied by their support network (a friend, family members, etc.) after prior discussion with Richtungswechsel. We are also sensitive to excluding certain triggering topics if a PWLE requires. Being aware of and continuous checking of power imbalances is also part of our trauma-informed approach.
 - b. Using inclusive, rights-compliant and humane language which avoids stereotypes, biases and stigmatising labels. (Please contact us for our Language Guide).

Lived Experience Engagement Framework (cont.)

3. **Informed consent and gathering feedback for self-evaluation** of our organisational stance. Rather than top-down 'informing', we are open to a voluntary dialogue with PWLE on the value of lived experience, need and expectations from both sides, the purpose, timelines, intended use, impact, limitations and compensation (if any) of their stories and consultation so as to safeguard informed consent. Evaluation of the work done together and future steps will also be shared with the involved PWLE. It will be made explicit that their participation is not dependent on them revealing their stories. They may do so only if they themselves think it is relevant and valuable. If required, a contract explaining all these features can be signed by both parties prior to the engagement.
4. Similarly, we are committed to including cultural, age, and neuro-**diversity** and **reducing barriers to participation**. This also includes training and support required for participation, in case PWLE do not have the required information or skills for particular kind of participation.
5. **Talents and expertise beyond incarceration**: We also recognise that PWLE is **not a sole identity** and contribution is welcome from other aspects of every person's life as well. Furthermore, we do not uphold any hierarchy within lived experience with regards to time since, duration of or type of lived experience. Thus, people of any age, legal status, with any level or kind of lived experience are welcome irrespective of whether they wish to be involved long-term, short-term or ad-hoc with Richtungswechsel.
6. **Compensation** will always be fair and negotiated before the activity. This can include monetary and/or other support (child care, transport) and it may also be offered in advance, if required. Compensation will differ based on roles and capacities such as participant (might include sharing lived experience stories), advisor, consultant or board member.
7. **Media**: We ensure that our blogs, articles, social media and public engagement material does not propagate stereotypes but rather challenges and breaks away from the dominant, harmful and stigmatising images of PWLE. We replace these with positive representations by avoiding references and details of offences. We invite input from PWLE in formulating these favourable narratives.
8. **Advisory Board**: Having secured an inclusion fund to build our Lived Experience advisory board, by the end of 2027 Richtungswechsel is will actively include PWLE involvement at the highest levels of organisational decision-making.
9. **Life priorities**: We understand the challenges of re-entering society and navigating society for PWLE. Hence, we are flexible and open to negotiate time commitments based on other life priorities.
10. **Skill development**: This may include onboarding, training, mentoring, role preparation, and support to build the skills and confidence required for current or future roles. By the end of 2027, we are committed to developing a training and onboarding course for PWLE at Richtungswechsel - get in touch to find out more about this via info@richtungswechsel.or.at

We work with experts by experience, other NGOs, agencies and professionals to support and guide us in building these safe, equitable and trauma-informed interactions and spaces.

Join us in voluntary, advisory, core team member, partner organisation member roles in any of the following capacities:

- Policy
- Research
- Training and Education
- Event participation
- Feedback and Evaluation

We also welcome initiative applications via bewerbung@richtungswechsel.or.at

What is Lived Experience and What is Lived Experience Expertise?

Lived experience, in relation to the criminal justice system, refers to the first-hand knowledge, perceptions, and narratives of people directly affected by crime, criminalisation, punishment, victimisation, and social control. This includes, but is not limited to, people who have been incarcerated, people who have experienced victimisation, families, peers, friends, communities, volunteers, social workers, and others whose lives have been shaped by contact with the criminal justice system. While professional expertise is also valuable, lived experience expertise is distinct because it is grounded in the embodied, relational, emotional, and personal realities of being affected by the system.

Lived experience expertise, however, is more than simply having lived through an experience. It refers to the knowledge that emerges when personal and collective experiences are critically reflected upon, contextualised, and used to inform practice, policy, research, advocacy, governance, and systems change. Lived experience experts bring forms of knowledge that are often excluded from institutional decision-making: knowledge about how systems are felt, navigated, resisted, survived, and understood by those most directly affected by them (Antojado & Cantu). This expertise can reveal the gaps between policy intention and lived reality, expose the harms hidden within formal processes, and offer more ethical, grounded, and transformative ways of responding to crime, harm, punishment, and social control.

Most social systems are built through unequal hierarchies of power, authority, and knowledge (Antojado, 2026). These systems often privilege institutional voices while marginalising those who have been most directly affected by harm, punishment, exclusion, and control. A commitment to lived experience seeks to unsettle these hierarchies by creating the conditions for equitable, genuine, and sustained partnership. This requires more than consultation. It requires shared authority, meaningful participation, fair recognition, and a willingness to change institutional attitudes, practices, and decision-making structures (Antojado, 2023).

Lived experience is never singular, simple, or interchangeable. It is shaped by intersectional circumstances, where a person may navigate incarceration, victimisation, family involvement, professional roles, or community-based work while also living with intersecting identities and social positions, including being LGBTQIA+, FLINTA, racialised, a migrant, or a person with disability. We recognise the importance of context, complexity, and difference in how people experience crime, victimisation, punishment, and social control.

For this reason, we reject superficial, symbolic, or tokenistic uses of lived experience. We do not treat personal stories as replaceable, interchangeable, or capable of speaking for all people affected by the criminal justice system. Instead, we uphold the particular importance of each voice, identity, and story on its own terms. We are committed to moving away from tokenism and towards ethical, sustainable, and accountable partnership with lived experience experts (Antojado & Cantu, 2026).

Drawing on Antojado's (2025) concept of common experiential narrative, we also recognise that individual lived experiences can reveal recurring themes, shared conditions, and collective patterns of harm, exclusion, resistance, and survival. Common experiential narrative does not erase difference, nor does it claim that all people with lived experience speak from the same position. Rather, it helps identify the dominant patterns that emerge across many distinct experiences. We are thus committed to working with lived experience in ways that are careful, relational, and non-extractive. We seek to value lived experience expertise without re-traumatising people, reducing them to their stories, or asking them to repeatedly perform pain in order to be heard (PRI, 2024).

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