

Gerstein Crisis Centre

# Strategic Plan

2026  
2031



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# Executive Summary

For over 35 years, the Gerstein Crisis Centre has been a leader in community-based, non-medical crisis support—meeting people where they are and offering low-barrier, strength-based care. We’ve seen remarkable growth in recent years, along with new opportunities that come with greater complexity.

The demand for mental health and crisis services continues to increase as poverty, homelessness, and limited access to resources impact more people. Internally, our team has expanded from 60 crisis workers to over 180. In 2024 alone, eight mobile crisis teams facilitated more than 12,000 community visits.

This significant growth and change have driven the need for the Gerstein Strategic Plan 2026-2031. This plan strengthens the foundation that makes Gerstein trusted and effective: a values-rooted model grounded in dignity, equity, choice, and lived/living experience. It is built on broad, careful listening to more than 175 contributors—service users, staff, leaders, partners, and community members—through surveys, interviews, focus groups, and workshops.

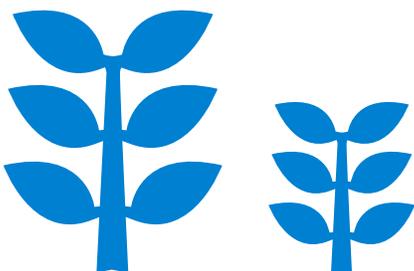
## Our direction has two aims:

-  **Strengthen Our Core:** Keep services accessible and person-led; support staff with healthy workloads, supervision, learning, and equity-centred practice; and make progress transparent through clear measures.
-  **Achieve System-Wide Impact:** Share and evaluate our model; deepen reciprocal partnerships; and help shape a compassionate, rights-based, accessible, community-rooted mental-health system.

To realize this, we will concentrate on four priorities:

- 01 Foster a resilient, connected, supported team** by maintaining a healthy, inclusive, psychologically safe workplace; aligning staffing and workload; strengthening supervision, recognition, and learning; embedding equity and reconciliation; and developing leaders and succession planning.
- 02 Lead with equity and centre lived experience** by integrating equity and reconciliation principles in governance, leadership and service design; centring lived/living expertise in decisions; using plain language and culturally safe approaches; deepening reciprocal partnerships; and expanding timely access to low-barrier, high-quality supports.
- 03 Stabilize and evolve our infrastructure and practice** by simplifying and strengthening HR, finance, scheduling, and technology; clarifying roles and policies; stewarding finances with strong oversight; and building data and digital capacity for learning, improvement, and transparent impact.
- 04 Advance our model and shape the future of crisis care** by documenting and evaluating our approach; sharing training and knowledge to support others; and advocating for policies and investments that expand compassionate, community-based responses.

By focusing on this, we ensure Gerstein stays responsive to communities and helps build a more compassionate, effective crisis-care system across Toronto, aligned with our vision of communities where everyone belongs.





# A Time of Growth and Change

For over 35 years, Gerstein Crisis Centre has been a leader in community-based crisis care and recovery support. Our services meet people where they are and reflect the realities of their lives. From our crisis line and mobile teams to short-term respite, justice diversion, and substance use support, we provide low-barrier, holistic support that promotes stability, strength, and wellness. We believe every person has the right to define their own path to recovery.

Our last few years have been marked by rapid and significant growth and change. Our team has expanded from 60 crisis workers to over 180. Demand for mental health and crisis services continues to rise. At the same time, the people and communities we serve face immense systemic barriers – poverty, homelessness, criminalization, and a lack of accessible resources shape their daily realities.

To address rising needs, we expanded programs and partnerships, welcoming new staff and service users. In 2024, we facilitated over 12,000 mobile team visits with 8 crisis teams in South Central Toronto and South Etobicoke. Access points now include our 24-hour crisis line, the 988 National Suicide Prevention Line, 211 for mobile team access, diversion from 911, and co-location in Toronto Public Libraries, with Toronto Transit (TTC) starting in November.

Gerstein is increasingly acknowledged as a system leader and model for community based crisis response offering person centred and holistic care.

None of this is possible without our dedicated staff who consistently demonstrate resilience, compassion, and a deep commitment to care. Their ability to hold space, build trust, and bring both skill and heart to every interaction makes our work possible.

We're also strengthened by our partners—organizations and allies who challenge us to grow, share in the work, and advocate for systems and services that reflect the dignity and rights of the people we serve. Their trust and collaboration expand our reach and deepen our impact.

While growth brings new opportunities, it also introduces new complexity. With more people, programs, and decisions, strong infrastructure and clear communication are essential to reducing silos, supporting team connection, and building organizational frameworks that reflect our values. This includes ensuring equitable workloads, fostering strong team connections, and providing practical support for staff well-being.

This is a moment of both reflection and possibility. To move forward with intention, we must stay connected to our roots, reimagine how we show up for one another, and evolve the systems that support us—all while remaining grounded in our values and our commitment to equity and anti-oppression.

Listening has always been central to our work, and it remains the cornerstone of this plan. We built this strategy directly on the insights and perspectives of those we serve, our staff, our partners, and the broader community. This bold and inspiring Strategic Plan honours our legacy of providing community-based support while preparing us for what's next. It stabilizes and strengthens the foundation we stand on, ensuring our continued ability to deliver care that is values-driven, inclusive, and socially just. This plan is about shaping the future of crisis support—one that is led by values, grounded in relationships, and, most critically, accountable to the communities we serve.



Awarding certificates at the conclusion of a WRAP session

# Who We Are

For more than three decades, Gerstein Crisis Centre has been a leader in community-based, non-medical crisis support. We pioneered mobile crisis response and continue to expand our reach through new programs and partnerships, including our role as a leading partner in the Toronto Community Crisis Service. We are internationally recognized as a trusted model of compassionate, rights-based crisis care.

Our services are designed to address the realities people face every day: housing and income pressures, safety concerns, stigma, and systemic barriers. We offer care that is practical, respectful, and grounded in lived experience. From our crisis line and mobile teams to short-term respite, justice diversion, and substance use support, we provide low-barrier, holistic support that promotes stability, strength, and wellness. We believe every person has the right to define their own path to recovery.

Our approach is shaped by the voices of people with lived experience, strengthened through partnerships, and rooted in the communities we serve. We foster connection, build confidence, and walk alongside people, providing support in ways that honour their strengths and stories.

GCC staff & City of Toronto officials  
at the TCCS expansion launch in  
September 2024



## OUR VISION

Communities where every person belongs and has the support, respect, and autonomy to shape their life, free from stigma, discrimination, and systemic barriers.

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## OUR MISSION

We provide accessible, community-based crisis and recovery support guided by lived experience and grounded in dignity, equity, and choice.

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## OUR APPROACH

We offer an anti-oppressive, community-based and trauma-informed approach to crisis and recovery. Grounded in lived expertise and self-determination, our approach respects individuals' autonomy and ability to define their own identities, experiences, and goals.

# OUR VALUES

Our values guide our work and form the foundation of this Strategic Plan. They are our enduring commitments and the ethical framework for every decision we make. Grounding our work in these values ensures integrity, dignity, and safety in every interaction. They are the anchor that keeps us focused on what makes us unique, even as we grow and evolve.

This plan is built directly on this foundation: it aligns our priorities and investments, clarifies how we work together, and strengthens our ability to learn from with the people we serve continuously. This ensures our services remain responsive, person-led, and highly effective for our clients, team, partners, and the community.



## Autonomy

We believe in each person's capacity to make informed choices. Rooted in dignity and human rights, we are committed to supporting autonomy and self-determination for those we serve and fostering a culture of trust and accountability within our teams.



## Strength-Based

We believe in honouring the unique wisdom and capacities of team members, partners, and clients. Our approach is grounded in the understanding that everyone brings a wealth of knowledge and distinctive skills. We foster an environment where these strengths are acknowledged and celebrated.



## Diversity of Perspectives

We show up with presence and curiosity. We listen, ask questions, reflect, and make sure that people feel truly seen and heard - understanding is where everything starts.



## Collaboration

We collaborate from a foundation of mutual trust and respect to serve our clients, colleagues, and community. Every partnership presents an opportunity to broaden our perspective and deepen our understanding. We foster a culture of connection where voices are heard, decisions are shared, and the conditions for safety are built together.



## Anti-racism & Anti-oppression

We recognize that systems of oppression and racism exist at all levels of society, impacting our team, clients, and communities. We are committed to embedding equity within our work, the communities we serve and the leadership we provide, and taking action to address historical and current systemic barriers. This includes integrating anti-racism and anti-oppression as an ongoing journey of learning, critical examination, and accountable action.



## Safety & Wellbeing

We create environments where kindness, safety, and well-being are the foundation. We build trust, reduce harm, and build systems and services that support healing, equity, and belonging upholding the dignity and whole-person and wellness of everyone who engages with us.



## Community

We believe in the power of community to support, heal, and foster belonging. We work alongside the communities we serve, building deep trust and lasting partnerships. By centring their voices and honouring their experiences, we collaboratively shape our work to strengthen connections between people, their histories, and the systems that shape their lives.

The ED, service users & staff at a Human Rights Watch panel discussion with the Mayor of Toronto



# Our Path Forward

This plan outlines a clear path to sustaining Gerstein's long-term strength and resilience - an organization built on cohesive teams, simple and reliable systems, and enduring growth anchored in equity, reconciliation and accountability. It honours our legacy as a pioneering, community-based crisis service, grounded in the voices of people with lived and living experience, centring the people we serve in everything we do.

Our strategy has a dual focus:

- Strengthen Our Core:** By strengthening cohesion and capacity and building scalable infrastructure, we ensure services remain low-barrier and person-led, staff are supported to do their best work, and progress is measured and transparent.
- Achieve System-Wide Impact:** We build on the best of Gerstein to drive system-wide change, helping to shape a mental health system that is compassionate, rights-based, and community-rooted, while staying rooted in what makes us a trusted anchor and leader.

H2H staff conducting outreach in the community



To achieve these outcomes, we will focus on the following four priorities. They are described briefly below, and outlined in more detail on the following pages.

01

## Foster a Resilient, Connected, and Supported Team

Create an equitable, connected and safe environment that supports well-being, develops leaders, and sustains high-quality care.

02

## Lead With Equity and Centre Lived Experience

Embed anti-oppression, reconciliation, and accessibility across how we lead, partner and serve, protecting dignity, supporting safety, and creating belonging.

03

## Stabilize and Evolve Our Infrastructure and Practice

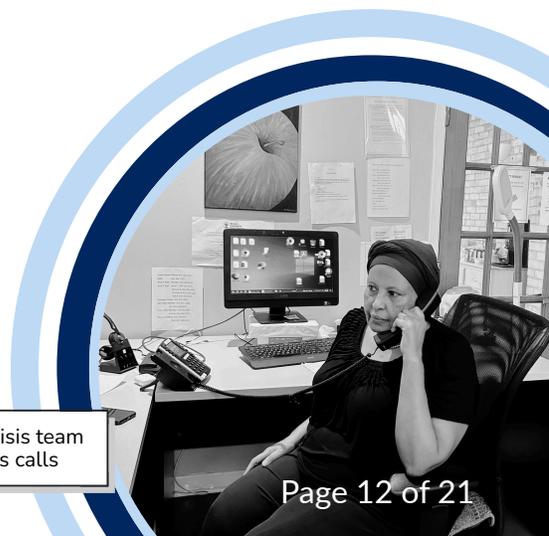
Strengthen core systems and simplify everyday practices to reduce strain, support wellness, and sustain values-aligned growth.

04

## Advance Our Model and Shape the Future of Crisis Care

Document and strengthen our model, train and mentor others, and advocate for policy and funding that expand compassionate community-based crisis support.

These priorities will guide the work, inform partnerships, and help ensure we stay focused on what matters most. Annual work plans will guide their implementation, and projects will be aligned with them to ensure effort remains focused. We'll listen about impact and value, share progress, and adapt. If work doesn't advance these priorities, we'll pause or redesign it. Applied this way, the priorities strengthen Gerstein and contribute to a more compassionate, resilient crisis system across Toronto—keeping care low-barrier, accessible, equitable, and safe.



The Charles Street crisis team responding to crisis calls

## PRIORITY 1

# Foster a Resilient, Connected, and Supported Team

Gerstein's impact rests on our people and a values-rooted culture. As demand and complexity rise and our capacity is stretched, we need structures and supports that are steady, fair, and sustainable. This priority reduces day-to-day strain by clarifying roles, balancing workloads, strengthening supervision and support, and implementing simple, reliable systems. It also protects continuity through succession planning and leadership development, while embedding equity, anti-oppression, and reconciliation in everyday practice. The result: a safe, supportive environment where lived/living expertise leads, care is sustainable, and the foundation is strong for every other priority in this plan.

## AIM

**Create a healthy, equitable, and psychologically safe working and learning environment that prioritizes well-being and empowers people to grow, lead with connection, and contribute in values-aligned ways.**

## OBJECTIVES



**Support well-being and resilience:** Align staffing and workload with real needs, plan with equity in mind, and ensure fair, transparent compensation.



**Equity in Everyday Practice:** Embedding equity, anti-oppression, and reconciliation in HR, training, leadership, and everyday practice to create a safe, inclusive, values-aligned and accountable workplace.



**Leadership at Every Level** Enable growth and foster leadership at all levels through meaningful recognition, inclusive feedback, transparent decision-making, and equitable access to learning.



**Recognition, Feedback & Learning:** Support organizational continuity and long-term resilience through succession planning and leadership development that position the Gerstein Crisis Centre to grow with integrity.

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## PRIORITY 2

# Lead With Equity and Centre Lived Experience

We centre lived and living experience in how we govern, design, and decide. This priority brings these commitments into daily practice, ensuring equity becomes a shared practice, supported by skills, tools, and measures, so it remains consistent as we grow. We embed reconciliation and accessibility, use plain language, and design with cultural safety in mind—deepening trust and supporting belonging. We will add, maintain, and improve quality, low-barrier services, expanding timely access to the supports people need, where and when they need them. By doing so, we strengthen our integrity and accountability and help shape policy and system design in collaboration with the people we serve.

## AIM

**Centre equity, anti-oppression, reconciliation, accessibility, and lived/living experience in how we lead, make decisions, and build relationships, so every interaction protects dignity, safety, and belonging at Gerstein and in the communities we serve.**

## OBJECTIVES



**Centre Expertise in Decision-Making:** Centre lived and living expertise in governance, service design, and organizational decision-making, ensuring the voices and perspectives of those most impacted by our services inform shape how we work.



**Deepen Partnerships and Co-create Solutions:** Grow community partnerships by deepening trust, strengthening reciprocity, and co-creating solutions that reflect shared purpose and mutual accountability



**Sustain Anti-Oppressive and Safe Practices:** Sustain Anti-racism and reconciliation commitments and embed anti-oppressive, identity-affirming, accessible, plain-language, and culturally safe practice across all services and interactions



**Integrate Equity into Leadership and Culture:** Make equity a shared practice across how we work, decide, and lead—building the skills, tools, and simple measures that keep it real every day.

## PRIORITY 3

# Stabilize and Evolve Our Infrastructure and Practice

Growth has brought more services, more people, and more decisions. To keep work seamless and purpose-aligned, we need foundations that are simple, reliable, and able to grow without overburdening staff. This priority strengthens the core tools and everyday practices that directly reduce strain, clarify roles, and protect resources so people can do their best work. This focus ensures Gerstein can grow effectively and sustainably without losing the distinctiveness of our values and model.

## AIM

**Strengthen the tools, structures, and practices that create a stable, supportive foundation, so our infrastructure enables our people to do their best work and stay connected to our purpose.**

## OBJECTIVES



**Stabilize Core Systems and Technology:** Evolve and stabilize core infrastructure—HR, finance, scheduling, and technology—with a people-first lens so they are accessible, flexible, and responsive.



**Enhance Data and Digital Capacity:** Strengthen our data and digital capabilities to support learning, continuous improvement, informed decision-making, and effectively telling our story—capturing and communicating the impact of our work in ways that inspire and build trust.



**Simplify Practices to support quality services:** Align policies and everyday practices to reinforce autonomy, accountability, and clarity, thereby supporting quality care.



**Support Organizational Sustainability:** Ensure strong financial stewardship and thoughtful investment of our resources, supporting organizational sustainability.

## PRIORITY 4

# Advance Our Model and Shape the Future of Crisis Care

The need for compassionate, community-rooted crisis response is longstanding. The current mental health landscape is presenting new opportunities and complexities. To amplify Gerstein's unique model and expand access to services, we must proactively articulate our approach, demonstrate its value with data, and share what works. This priority focuses on building the evidence base, educating others, and forming strategic partnerships to inform policy and enhance public understanding. By championing community-led and rights-based care, we will expand approaches to incorporate strengths-based approaches that move away from over-medicalization and solidify community-based responses as a key norm within the system.

## AIM

**Protect what makes Gerstein Crisis Centre unique while strengthening our model, sharing what works, and shaping a humane, community-rooted system of crisis and recovery support.**

## OBJECTIVES



**Document Our Model:** Build evidence for and document our model of care, including its principles, practices, and outcomes, as well as the non-medical, strength-based, and relational approach.



**Ensure Continuous Service Evolution:** Evolve and grow services through evaluation, learning and pilots, responding to emerging needs while staying grounded in our values and approach.



**Build Capacity Through Knowledge Sharing:** Build training and knowledge-sharing infrastructure to expand Gerstein's role in training, mentorship, and community-based learning with partner organizations.



**Advocate for Policy and Comprehensive Investment:** Partner to influence policy and public understanding, informed by lived and service delivery experience, to shift narratives and strengthen investment in comprehensive resources that support community wellbeing.



Gerstein Staff at an all staff  
Anti Black racism training

## How We Built This Plan

This Strategic Plan was developed through a rigorous, people-centred process led by internal leadership, strengthened by STR Consulting and grounded in engagement and listening. We combined sector insights with broad engagement of staff, partners, and the community to ensure this plan aligns with Gerstein’s mission and vision, responds to today’s needs and opportunities, and remains flexible as they evolve.

We listened widely and with care to the communities we serve, our team and leaders, the Board, and partners across Toronto to understand what’s working, the opportunities to strengthen our services, the pressures teams face, and the possibilities for a better system. Engagement was designed to be low-barrier and safe, with clear consent and confidentiality, and anchored in transparency, inclusion, equity, and psychological safety.

The process unfolded across six sequential phases and involved more than 175 voices. Data gathering included a mix of anonymous surveys, targeted interviews, facilitated focus groups and collaborative workshops. Initial themes were iterated with leadership to set the priorities that follow, resulting in a robust action plan.

# Development Timeline



## SUMMER 2024

### Foundation Work & Data Collection

Team workshops and surveys to refine organizational values, understand current culture, and gather input on current organization needs and priorities



## DEC' 24 - MAY '25

### STR Data Collection

In partnership with STR, fielded additional surveys and interviews and coordinated staff engagement to deepen the evidence



## JUNE 2025

### Create Initial Draft

Synthesized findings into a draft strategy defining priorities, aims, and objectives aligned to mission, vision and values.



## JUNE - SEPT 2025

### Gather Feedback

Shared the draft with staff, leadership, and the Board through conversations and workshops to test fit, feasibility, and language.



## SEPT - OCT 2025

### Refine & Format

Revised the plan based on feedback, clarified measures and phasing, applied an equity and plain-language lens, and prepared the document for broad release.



## NOVEMBER 2025

### Finalize & Share

Confirmed Board approval, shared the plan with staff, partners, and the community, and develop implementation road map.

# Acknowledgements & Gratitude

This Strategic Plan was developed through a rigorous, people-centred process, led by our internal leadership - including the Management Team and Governance Committee - with invaluable guidance and expertise from our Board Chair, Stephanie Gloyn. We would also like to acknowledge our collaboration with STR Consulting, whose expertise in data collection and analysis engaged over 150 stakeholders. We extend our sincere thanks for the leadership and unwavering commitment to our mission, they all offered.

The voices of the 150 stakeholders we engaged are at the core of this plan. They grounded our reflections and, as with all our work at Gerstein Centre, listening remained central to our approach. We are deeply grateful for the time, commitment, expertise and engagement of our stakeholders - including our staff teams, community partners, and, most importantly, our service users. Their collective insights ensure that this plan aligns with Gerstein Centre's mission, vision, and values and responds to current needs and opportunities.

FRESH staff & participants  
enjoying a scenic day trip to Elora





**If you have question or require more information about this plan please contact:**

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