

CREATING A REPOSITORY OF NON-STIGMATIZING VISUAL IMAGES ON SUBSTANCE USE

A REPORT BY

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PREAMBLE

This report has been led, informed and compiled by and for people who use drugs (PWUD). The project received the support of Human Health Factors (HHF) for collaborative design and the input of Public Health Ontario (PHO) for evidence on the impact of stigma and relevant strategies. During the project, we created a non-judgmental space for dialogue about the current realities of PWUD. We acknowledged a continuum of use and reasons for drug use, multiple intersecting areas of discrimination and inequity, and escalating grief and loss during the drug toxicity crisis.

The content reflects the voice of community members as a primary focus, and shares candid and valuable perspectives within the context of drug use in Ontario. This approach recognizes the need for meaningfully engaging, listening, and responding to the voices of PWUD in creating programs and policies intended to serve them. The vision for a repository of non-stigmatizing visual images on substance use is intended to empower PWUD to share and promote images that depict strengths-based, accurate and authentic community experiences. Such a repository is a promising approach for anti-stigma intervention that will need to be further evaluated to understand potential benefits and mitigate unintended harms.

Keeping in mind that people who use drugs come from a wide range of perspectives, we aimed to present this report remaining true to the voices of community members involved. This report holds significant value in its commitment to engaging PWUD as key collaborators in enhancing current practices in visual imagery on the subject matter. While originally designed to inform the development of a repository of images, it serves as a promising foundation for exploring innovative anti-stigma approaches that align with the specific experiences and realities of PWUD.

BACKGROUND

Have you ever wondered how the media shapes our views on substance use and overdose? Numerous studies highlight a link between media portrayals and public knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions toward people who use drugs (PWUD) (1-10). As a result, Canadians who use substances commonly report experiencing stigma and discrimination, which creates barriers and inequities such as poor access to services and quality of care (9, 11).

We use the term media to include news articles and outlets, reports (online and in print), and government and institutional documents. Media isn't just about facts; it's like a storyteller, giving us a particular way of looking at the world (1).

This storytelling has a political side—it influences how we think about things, especially drugs and the people who use them. Importantly, many challenges related to drugs are reported

separately, not showing how things like housing, mental health, and poverty are interconnected. Media tends to focus on symptoms rather than telling the stories and social issues behind the stigma (2). By keeping these aspects separate, the broader systemic and institutional factors at play remain somewhat invisible (1).

The media can influence the public in various ways, telling us what issues to care about and shaping our attitudes. It is powerful and has a longstanding connection with politics and public policy, directly impacting each other (5). Many people, even those with little knowledge of substance use, rely on the media for their understanding of the issue, making it a powerful tool to change opinions and drug policies (3,4).

Both imagery and language are potent tools in communication and behavior change, serving to identify, label, and alienate stigmatized groups (5,6). Language can both reinforce and counter stigmatizing attitudes, views, and actions (7). Several language resources and tools have been developed in Canada, including language primers for the media and healthcare professionals, fact sheets, and infographics to reduce stigmatizing behaviours and attitudes towards PWUD (7-10,12,13). While much research has focused on stigmatizing language, stigmatizing imagery has been less explored.

The goal of this project was to develop a plan for collecting photos, artwork and other visual artifacts that accurately and positively reflect people who use drugs and other affected communities. This approach was grounded and informed by established photovoice methods, used to empower communities and foster social change (15). The aim was to provide guidance to individuals within the community in their efforts to collect such visual content, and for these resources to live in a repository that can be accessed by editors, publishers, authors, and community members to accompany public reporting, publications, and news media. Ultimately, such a repository has potential to reduce stigma and the harms to PWUD that result.

The project was led by the Ontario Network of People Who Use Drugs (ONPUD). The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) funded the project. Public Health Ontario (PHO) provided scientific and technical support and Healthcare Human Factors (HHF) contributed design and facilitation activities.

METHODS

This project used a collaborative, community-based participatory approach to discuss themes such as stigmatizing versus positive imagery, image collection mechanisms, community-based governance frameworks, audience engagement, and issues related to storage, licensing, and compensation.

Formation of the Steering Committee

To facilitate the project, the team initiated the formation of a Steering Committee consisting of 10-15 people who use drugs across Ontario. ONPUD facilitated the recruitment of potential Steering Committee members (invitation through direct outreach), and they were invited to participate in a series of four virtual facilitated meetings.

Information Session

Community members interested in joining the Steering Committee were invited to a virtual, one-hour meet and greet session. During this session, they received detailed information about the project, learned about the expectations associated with Steering Committee participation, honorarium details, and had the opportunity to ask questions related to their involvement.

Although participation in the Steering Committee meant that individuals were expected to participate across all meetings, potential participants were told that their participation would be completely voluntary, and that there was some flexibility if individuals had conflicts with their schedule. The project team decided to allow the flexibility to recruit up to 15 individuals, to ensure that we have at least 10 members attending each meeting. If participants were interested in forming part of the Steering Committee, they emailed the project coordinator to confirm participation and scheduling details.

Steering Committee Meetings

The four facilitated meetings, which we referred to as "meetings," each spanned a duration of two hours and were designed to build upon one another, fostering a continuous and evolving discussion based on previous meeting outcomes. The structure of these meetings included the following elements:

- / House rules and voluntary participation: before the beginning of each meeting, facilitators went through the general house rules of sharing thoughts and respecting others in the space. Additionally, facilitators re-iterated the goal of the project and the Steering Committee's expected role in the project. Participants were told their participation was voluntary, and had the opportunity to ask questions about participation. Facilitators informed participants that by participating in the meeting, they would be providing their implied consent to record any notes of the discussions held during the meeting;

- / Activities involving the Miro board: facilitators recorded notes on the Miro board based on the discussions and input of Steering Committee members;
- / Presentation elements: occasional presentations on topics such as particular frameworks and principles were incorporated to provide the Steering Committee with information to guide their discussions;
- / Roundtable discussions: a less structured roundtable discussion component encouraged reflective and flexible exchanges on the topic.

The meetings were co-facilitated by members of the project team to ensure a smooth and productive process. The agendas for each meeting can be found in the accompanying appendix.

Meeting Notes and Preparatory Activities

Meeting notes were taken during each meeting, and these notes were subsequently shared with Steering Committee members. Additionally, Steering Committee members were expected to complete preparatory activities before some of the meetings to enrich the discussion.

Report Development and Review

The findings generated from the four meetings served as the foundation for co-creating this report. The report underwent rigorous review processes, including revision by all team members. It was also shared with Steering Committee members for their initial review and their final assessment, ensuring the accuracy of the report's representation of the discussions held during the meetings. A final, follow-up meeting was held with the Steering Committee to discuss any final feedback and questions related to the report, the overall goals of the project, as well as potential knowledge translation activities that could be explored to disseminate the findings of the project. The assertions in the text come from the findings of the workshop discussions with community members, and they primarily reflect their perspectives on images used to depict substance use.

FINDINGS

What Stigma + Strength Look Like in Imagery

As discussions began, the group explored a series of sample images identified by community members and characterized each image as stigmatizing or positive. The images sparked a discussion about what stigma and/or positivity look like in visual artifacts. This resulted in a series of considerations for use by photographers and artists to ensure that images represent the strengths of the community of PWUD, and avoid false assumptions and stigmatization.

As a summary of the group feedback, each of the following points are important considerations for people taking photographs and creating art that represent substance use and the overdose crisis:

1. Photos should tell the right story

A photo might be found stigmatizing in one light, but non-stigmatizing in another. For example, a photo of an encampment, if chosen to represent a story about people living outdoors being at higher risk of death, is not stigmatizing, but an accurate illustration of outdoor living. However, if the same photo was chosen to represent a story about overdose deaths, it is stigmatizing as it reinforces the false assumption that most people who use drugs are unhoused. It's important that photos match the content that they are chosen to represent.

2. Accuracy and comprehensiveness is critical for credibility

Images that represent drug use typically portray intravenous injection. To authentically represent the use of drugs, accuracy in what drugs are being used and how they can be used safely is important. Imagery should capture a diversity of supplies, including safer smoking kits, such as crack, meth, and foil kits.

3. Portray the community authentically, and not for shock value

The media amplifies substance use images that convey addiction and weakness, driving the public to make false assumptions about PWUD. It is rare to see images of people with successful jobs or loving families, using drugs for pleasure or in a social situation. Meanwhile, the majority of PWUD are employed, housed, and enjoy drugs the same way others enjoy a glass of wine. Photos that tell a story about PWUD should reflect the fact that they come from all walks of life and use for a diversity of reasons.

4. Cleanliness and organization over messiness and chaos

Drug use is often portrayed as a scene of chaos. Photos that convey a mess of drug use supplies leave the audience to assume that PWUD are disorganized and use irresponsibly. Safe drug use, be it at home or in a safe consumption site, is clean and organized and should be portrayed accordingly.

5. Humanize people who use drugs

To bring light to the beauty and strength of the community of PWUD, photographs should showcase joy, authenticity, and relatability. Images that highlight how people who use drugs are “just like everyone else” can help to drive connection between communities. Examples of such photos might include images of families, of daily activities such as dog walking, of group gatherings, or of celebrations.

6. Avoid conveying shame

Images of PWUD often portray personal isolation or interpersonal judgment, evoking a sense of shame. These types of photographs lead people to falsely assume that PWUD are doing so in the shadows, without the support of their communities. They also suggest that people who use drugs do so to get heavily intoxicated, while many use drugs in a functional or enjoyable way.

7. It's OK to show the gut-wrenching sadness

Powerful visuals that showcase the devastating impacts of the overdose crisis shouldn't be shied away from. For example, images that bring attention to the number of people who have died at the hands of the crisis are important to share. These types of images help to drive the community's advocacy efforts.

8. Communicate the root cause

It is important to help an audience understand the real reasons that community members are dying at such a high rate. For example, the toxic drug supply and an insufficient social safety net are key drivers of the crisis. Images that bring attention to how systems fail the community of PWUD lead the public away from making false assumptions about why people overdose, such as personal irresponsibility and moral failure.

9. Promote action

Photographs that showcase activism can serve to reframe how the community perceives PWUD. For example, an image of people protesting in support of harm reduction efforts, can serve to portray the diverse community coming together, motivated to stand up for what they believe in. Protests are often beautiful displays of community, including powerful speeches, visual installations, music and dancing. Photos of these events can help to start conversations about the importance of advocating for the community and their needs.

10. Reflect a spectrum of drug use

Substance use imagery often supports the perception that drug use is harmful, interruptive, and disorderly. However, drugs can be used for pleasure, anxiety relief, freedom from pain, etc. The media can do better by showcasing photos that bring attention to the broader contexts in which people use drugs.

These considerations are just a start in balancing the nature of the images the public sees when stories are told about substance use and the overdose crisis. Whenever a publisher or journalist is looking for a photograph to accompany a story, the unique context of that story must be considered to establish what stigma and strength look like. And defining what stigma does and does not look like should always be done in partnership with the diverse community of people who use drugs.

Likewise, one repository, regardless of its size or breadth, will be unlikely to capture all potential images. And so the committee recommends not only that a repository of strength-based images be built, but also, that an index of trusted photographers from the community of PWUD be compiled in parallel.

How to Collect Positive Images

The steering committee agreed that the guiding philosophy for how to collect positive images should be to first look within the community of PWUD. This means prioritizing and amplifying community members that have photography skills and building skills among those who are interested.

Capacity building and supporting existing photographers within the community is important because:

- / It aligns with the overall principle that this project adheres to: *“Nothing about us without us”*
- / There is a tremendous amount of skill and diverse expertise within the community
- / Sensitive photographs (such as those related to overdose) will be more appropriately taken by someone from within the community who understands the context and conditions of the lives of their subjects, and will not discuss or disrupt the silent trauma of criminalization and living on the margins
- / PWUD, particularly those experiencing houselessness, are often made unsafe by non-consensual, sometimes predatory, street photography. So having someone from outside the community present and taking photographs for a repository risks the continued violation of the bodily autonomy and personal safety of PWUD
- / As equipment becomes more user friendly, less time and resources are required to train and equip new community photographers
- / Equipping community members as photographers gives them, and their subjects, the opportunity to tell their story

The committee felt that the best way to kickstart the collection of photographs would be to facilitate a series of photography workshops, led by and for PWUD. This would entail identifying one or more professional photographer(s) from within the community to teach other PWUD how to take high quality, high resolution photographs. To ease the scale up of this effort, training should happen both on high resolution digital cameras as well as phone cameras. The training should also include, among other things, guidance on photo editing, ethics, and cons.

An important consideration that has yet to be resolved is how PWUD will be equipped to lead photo taking efforts. Remaining questions include:

- / Who will invest in and own the required equipment?
- / How will equipment be accessed and shared?
- / How will equipment be maintained and by whom?
- / How will we ensure that PWUD, who are at risk of being stigmatized, are treated with dignity as they are granted access to expensive camera equipment?
- / How will we ensure that PWUD feel safe when accessing, transporting, using, and storing equipment?

Getting Free, Prior & Informed Consent

Before diving into the discussion around consent, the group came to the general consensus that photo subjects will need to give free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) before images can be taken and then before they can be entered into the repository.

As per the United Nations (14):

- / **Free** means that the consent is free, given voluntarily and without coercion, intimidation or manipulation. A process that is self-directed by the community from whom consent is being sought, unencumbered by coercion, expectations or timelines that are externally imposed.
- / **Prior** means that the consent is sought sufficiently in advance of any authorization or commencement of activities.
- / **Informed** means that the engagement and type of information should be provided prior to seeking consent and also as part of the ongoing consent process.

The committee recommends the consent process including the following specifications:

1. It should outline that the repository will have a set of standards, written by PWUD, that will detail the general principles that photo users must adhere to. For example, images are not to be used in stigmatizing ways (out of context, encouraging false and negative assumptions about PWUD), and are to be used only in the context of substance use or systemic harm.
2. The consent should include a checklist that makes it easy for people to select the contexts/use types that they consent to, and those that they do not.
3. The consent must be explicit about where these photos will live and who they might be accessed by and why.
4. The consent must transparently outline the risks and consequences of participation in this project.

5. People should be provided a copy of their consent form so that they continue to have access to this information and can come back to revisit their decision to consent at any time.
6. The consent process will be ongoing in order to allow people to easily withdraw consent, while clearly articulating the limits to withdrawing consent (e.g. once images circulate, they may be hard to take down).

The committee noted that people who use drugs are often perceived as vulnerable and, consequently, assumed to be unable to give consent. However, experiencing one type of vulnerability does not render people incapable of making decisions or having autonomy. Taking this decision making power away from PWUD furthers their stigmatization. And so the consent process for this project needs to ensure that people are aware of risks and harms, have constant access to the terms of their consent, and have the ability to easily withdraw consent as they choose.

Unanswered questions that still need to be considered include:

- / If a person withdraws consent, what process will be followed to ensure that their photos are removed from the repository? What, if anything, can be done to stop future circulation of the photo?
- / The consent process will need to give participants the choice over what is done with their photos should they pass away. How will we know if a photo subject has passed away?
- / How will the community find photo subjects? People are going to be apprehensive because of stigma and judgment.

Storing the Images & Granting Access

Given the committee's recommendations around how consent should be given for participation in the repository, the decision around where to store images will be influenced by the control that the community wishes to keep over the photos. For example, if a set of photos are to be used only in a specific context, the interface needs to communicate those terms and enable agreement to them. This drew the committee to lean towards the preference for creating a customized website (vs. using a photo marketplace such as Shutterstock) that would enable this degree of control. Further, they offered two suggestions as to how this could be designed:

1. Users submit a request to access a photo online, detailing their intentions for use. Decision making then happens by a moderator and if approved, enables the user to purchase the photo and agree to a set of terms.
2. Organize photos online by theme and by the context in which they are available for use, so that users know as they are browsing what the photos depict and what contexts of use they have been approved for.

However, the committee agreed that further exploration is needed into the smaller and more nimble photo marketplaces that exist (such as SmugMug and Foap) to see if they might allow this degree of control over how photos are displayed and shared, without the investment that is required to build a custom website.

Compensation

The steering committee recommends that all people involved in the creation of an image or other form of artwork be compensated for their time, effort, and expertise. This compensation should happen at the time the image or art is generated.

To fund this artistry, revenue can be generated through the licensing of photos. The committee debated the pros and cons of charging a fee for the use of photos. Proponents felt it was important to allow the compensation of photographers to encourage respect for artistry and not further the exploitation of PWUD. However, opponents were concerned that the audience for the repository may not be used to paying for photos, and thus fees might discourage adoption and disrupt the project's mission.

The committee then agreed that a balance needs to be struck through a tiered model. They offered a few suggestions as to how this might work:

- / Default to charging for photos, but create a process through which fees can be waived for certain individuals/use cases (e.g. PWUD and people using the images for purpose or mission-driven work can access photos free of charge).
- / Provide images free of charge but require the user to endorse the photographer and the repository that the image was taken from to continue to promote the site and its purpose.
- / A general pool of photographs could be offered free of charge, but a subscription would be required to access specific types of photos.

Regardless of how revenue is generated, the committee felt it important that PWUD be compensated for their time in an ethical and thoughtful way. This means that consent needs to be clearly explained so that the people being compensated have full autonomy and agency over their decision to participate.

Building an Audience

The overarching objective of this project is to shift the paradigm through which the public thinks about and perceives PWUD. The steering committee sees two potential avenues for photos to be shared with the general public.

1. Through the Repository

To change the ways in which the media and other influential organizations in society share stories about substance use and PWUD, the repository needs to build an audience with major players such as journalists, publishers, educational institutions, and even politicians.

To reach these individuals and organizations, a grass-roots, community-led approach was suggested. This approach relies on existing networks and connections, word of mouth, and simple communications such as mass emails. Building on this, the committee suggested offering “lunch and learn” sessions with target populations to generate awareness and spark conversation.

To articulate the importance of the repository and to encourage its use, communications should include the following key messages:

- / A lot of the imagery used today is stigmatizing and, as such, is a form of misinformation.
- / Articulating the truth through imagery matters because false narratives can cost people their lives.
- / Include quotes from PWUD about why some images are empowering and others are stigmatizing.
- / Highlight the steering committee and artists behind this project.

2. Beyond the Repository

The committee expressed interest in using positive and non-stigmatizing photos to reach the public with messages that de-stigmatize substance use, the drug poisoning crisis, and PWUD. Examples of how this might be done include:

- / Exhibits in galleries, museums, parks, community centres, etc.
- / Traditional marketing campaigns that would find positive images on billboards, park benches, subway stops, flyers, pamphlets, and on social media.
- / Interactive exhibits that spark community-based conversations, such as workshops, human libraries, and/or photos being shared alongside interviews or recorded conversation.

The conversation around direct messaging was concluded with the thought that a community-led social enterprise could be built to organize these publicity efforts and potentially raise funds that can be used to further the project’s mission.

NEXT STEPS

This report lays the groundwork for how a repository of non-stigmatizing images, built by and for PWUD, can come to life. But there are still questions that need to be answered and decisions that need to be made. Those decisions and the ongoing governance of a repository, must be led by PWUD.

As we look to the immediate next steps, here is some of what needs to be done to keep this important work moving.

1. A brief should be drafted that provides concrete examples of the images being used today and makes the case for why they stigmatize PWUD, to begin generating buy-in from the community, the media, and the general public.
2. Relationships need to be built with reporters and journalists to understand where they currently draw images from and how choices around image selection are made.
3. A needs assessment among PWUD should be completed to tell a more fulsome story of what the community wants and needs from this repository.
4. Job descriptions and contracts will need to be created, followed by community outreach, to begin recruitment for a diverse project team.
5. Policies and practices need to be developed to avoid and address oppressions such as racism and transphobia. Clear guidelines need to be in place so that people with intersecting identities are as safe as possible while doing the work.
6. Consent forms to participate in the project will need to be drafted.
7. Project activities will need to be defined to support the building of a project budget.

LIMITATIONS

1. Our project did not incorporate the perspectives of end-users (e.g., reporters, journalists, and government organizations) to gain insights into their decision-making processes when selecting images to represent People Who Use Drugs (PWUD) and the overdose crisis. This omission restricts our understanding of the full spectrum of the criteria behind image selection. It represents a missed opportunity to foster engagement with these end-users and PWUD, which could have enriched our recommendations.
2. The participation of 10-15 individuals in our study is not reflective of the diverse population of PWUD. Notably, there was a lack of representation of Indigenous, Black, and People of Color (IBPOC) individuals in our recruitment process. Furthermore, challenges encountered during virtual meetings, such as limited access for individuals in rural or remote areas and those without technology, and difficulties in adhering to organizational timelines, may have hindered the engagement of specific groups of

PWUD. These limitations may affect the generalizability of our findings and the report's capacity to address the distinct experiences and needs of these populations. Consequently, the recommendations presented in this report may not be universally applicable and effective across all communities and demographics.

3. Our project's budgetary constraints limited us to the planning phase, preventing the actual establishment of a repository of non-stigmatizing, strength-based images. While our findings provide critical insights into the process of creating such a repository and using non-stigmatizing images, the absence of the repository itself presents a challenge. End-users may struggle to locate and access these images, underscoring the necessity for a centralized repository to support these efforts.

CONCLUSION

While work remains, much was achieved through the steering committee's series of discussions. Together, the group faced images that sparked joy and those that brought on sadness, they had difficult conversations and productive discourse. This led to a series of important recommendations inspired by a collective drive to amplify the voices of people who use drugs and benefit the community. The steering committee is hopeful that this future repository will receive support and be embraced by other communities, stakeholders, policymakers, and society more broadly.

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NOTICE

This document is based on the expertise of people with lived/living experience from across the province of Ontario. It is guided by the current best available evidence at the time of publication. The application and use of this document is the responsibility of the user. ONPUD, PHO, HHF and PHAC assume no liability resulting from any such application or use. This document may be reproduced without permission for non-commercial purposes only and provided that appropriate credit is given. No changes and/or modification may be made to this document without express written permission from the ONPUD.

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APPENDICES: MEETING AGENDAS

Appendix 1: Meeting 01

- 10 MINS** **Welcome + Opening Remarks**
Why are we here today? What is the plan?
- 30 MINS** **Roundtable Discussion: What Does Stigma Look Like?**
Reflecting on and reacting to a series of images, identified as stigmatizing.
- 30 MINS** **Roundtable Discussion: What Does Positive Imagery Look Like?**
Reflecting on and reacting to a series of images, identified as positive.
- 40 MINS** **Activity: Principles of Positive Imagery**
What key themes arose in our discussion?
What principles should positive imagery adhere to?
- 10 MINS** **Reflection + Next Steps**
Where do we go from here?

Appendix 2: Meeting 02

- 15 MINS** **Welcome + Opening Remarks**
Why are we here today? What is the plan?
- 15 MINS** **Review: Discussion Themes from Meeting 01**
What does stigma and strength-based imagery look like?
- 60 MINS** **Activity: Designing the Mechanisms for Image Collection**
Review scenarios. Design the best process for each scenario.
- 10 MINS** **Break** (*will take around the halfway point*)
Stretch your legs, grab a snack!
- 10 MINS** **Discussion: How to create the most impact with imagery?**
How else, aside from a repository, can these images be used for good?
- 10 MINS** **Reflection + Next Steps**
Where do we go from here?

Appendix 3: Meeting 03

- 15 MINS** **Welcome + Opening Remarks**
Why are we here today? What is the plan?
- 20 MINS** **Activity: Designing the Mechanisms for Image Collection (cont.)**
Review scenarios. Design the best process for each scenario.
- 15 MINS** **Discussion: How to create the most impact with imagery?**
How else, aside from a repository, can these images be used for good?
- 10 MINS** **Break**
Stretch your legs, grab a snack!
- 15 MINS** **OCAP / EGAP Principles**
Community-based governance frameworks for the protection and control of information
- 30 MINS** **Activity: Protecting Privacy + Gathering Consent**
Scenario-based discussion around how to get consent and protect privacy for subjects.
- 10 MINS** **Reflection + Next Steps**
Where do we go from here?

Appendix 4: Meeting 04

- 15 MINS** **Welcome + Opening Remarks**
Why are we here today? What is the plan?
- 20 MINS** **Activity: Connecting with our Audience**
Who is our audience? How will we build awareness?
- 30 MINS** **Discussion: Storage, Licensing & Compensation**
Where should images live? How will they be protected, accessed and paid for?
- 10 MINS** **Break**
Stretch your legs, grab a snack!
- 30 MINS** **Activity: Planning for the Next Project**
What should the plan look like for the next phase of this project?
- 15 MINS** **Reflection + Next Steps**
Where do we go from here?