



STARTING A PEER NETWORK

What is a peer network?

A useful place to start would be to think about how you will explain to people what a peer network is. People living in shared accommodation arrangements may not be familiar with the term peer or peer network. It is worth having a short simple description to hand:

“A peer is another person like you who shares some of the same experiences.”

People can be peers by the very fact that they live in the same type of accommodation.

A network is really another name for a meeting or gathering.

Peer networks are where people with something in common meet up to make something good happen. They are not segregated day programs or special groups. And they support, and do not replace, the roles and relationships a person may have in other parts of their life.

Peer networks come in all shapes and sizes. A peer network might be a group that meets regularly at a community centre. It might be a facebook group – sharing information and providing online support. It might be three people catching up regularly to talk about things.

It doesn't matter what your peer network looks like; what matters is that the peer network is clear about how it is helping its members. This might be by assisting people to get new connections, and to learn from each other so that each member is better able to deal with issues or goals they have.

Evidence shows that people who are members of peer support networks gain friendships, information, increased confidence, social connections and leadership skills. Peers say that one of the best things about peer support is that people with similar experiences help each other and provide each other with support.

Peer networks can also help people to have a shared voice about common concerns. They can influence disability services and systems (such as the NDIS). Peer networks can also influence mainstream services like health and education, and help local communities be more welcoming and accessible.

These benefits might be particularly important for people living with others in group homes and boarding houses where it may be harder to make connections with people they don't live with because of the way shared living operates. Sometimes, people living in these types of shared living arrangements are less aware of their rights, have less access to help with having their voice heard, and might be particularly vulnerable to the decisions and actions of others.

It will be important to bear this in mind when looking at starting a peer network for people in shared living arrangements. Starting a network is likely to require significant time and effort to convince people to come along. It will likely require long term investment and significant relationship-building skills.

Arguably though, people in shared living arrangements such as group homes or boarding houses have the most to gain from peer networks, and this is why it is worth investing the effort in making this opportunity available.

Some key principles to think about when building a peer network for people in group homes and boarding houses

Building trust

There are some underlying principles which should be considered as part of engagement.

The first is that it will take time to earn trust through partnership. Do not expect trust to be there simply because you turned up. It is important to acknowledge the experience of people living in shared accommodation such as group homes and boarding houses. It is important to be sensitive when asking for some types of information. The concept of community engagement may be unfamiliar to some people who may not trust the process. They may be cautious in providing information or expressing a personal viewpoint.

Accessible and varied communication

The second important thing is that the peer network must be accessible and communication multi-faceted and engaging. Two components of communication particularly relevant to engaging marginalised populations are *images* and *similarity*. Images are often used to convey ideas across language barriers while perceived similarity between two communicators leads to more effective communication.¹

Thinking about people's world

The third element is to consider why a particular person or group has been labelled as 'hard to reach'. It is not that they are hard to reach but that it may be hard for them to reach out and the way you are going about setting up the peer network makes it hard for them to reach you. People reject the label of 'hard to reach':

"it makes it sound like the fault of the non service-user – "you are hard to reach" – like they are sat up on a shelf and we have got to lure them down with biscuits, or something.... actually if you just got a ladder and sat next to them that would be fine. (R1)"²

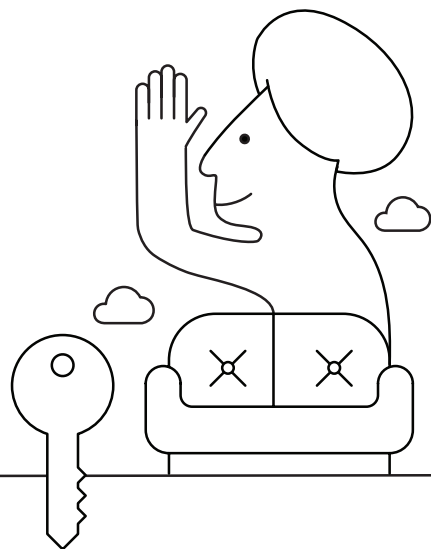
1 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1541931213601516>
2 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2856561/>

Peer networks may not always be about peer ownership

A community development approach, which aims to strengthen the community's capacity for ownership in planning and decision making and gives ownership of the peer network to the group, can be a good starting point for developing effective peer networks. But it is important to recognise that it may not be an effective approach for some people.

"The challenge for community development is to both enable marginalized populations to have a voice and influence, and help provide whatever support is needed—capacity building, self-esteem and building relationships—while also acknowledging the different underlying values that marginalized populations hold toward participation in health service planning and decision making."³

Some people living in group homes and boarding houses may not have any interest in messages of connection, empowerment or ownership that often attract other people to peer networks. So a peer network aimed at people living in group homes and boarding houses may need different levers to try and connect people to a peer network event.



What is the purpose of your new peer network?

Peer networks work better when the network has a clear purpose. It also makes it easier to attract members. People are more likely to come if they know the network is about things they care about.

This doesn't mean you have to write up a big document. Just think through what you want the peer network to do.

This is particularly important when thinking about a peer network for people living in a group home or boarding house. Clarity about the goals will help the facilitator to creatively explore the different ways those goals can be advanced.

Here are some examples of reasons why different peer networks might start for people in shared living like group homes and boarding houses:

- To talk about how to make the group home or boarding house better
- To share food
- To talk about the importance of feeling safe
- To talk about how to ask for help when it's needed
- To learn how to ask questions of service providers
- To learn about the NDIS
- To have something tangible, meaningful and personal to take into an NDIS planning meeting
- To talk about how to make the place where you live more homely, or how to move to a new place
- To learn about new things, like learning about rights, decision-making, self-advocacy
- To make new connections, like meeting people with similar experiences and learning from each other.



Where can you get help with resources and save money?

Most peer networks need help with at least some things, like a place to meet, transport, refreshments, sending out reminders, and so on.

This is particularly important when trying to build a peer network for people living in group homes and boarding houses. This is because they may be on a very low income, and may have access to far fewer resources compared to people in other settings.

It is important to think about what help the peer network members might need to be able to get to the meeting, especially if they live in a group home or a boarding house. This might include help with remembering, help to get ready, and help to travel to and from the venue. Sometimes a group home or boarding house agency might be able to help with this, so it is worth asking them once you know who your peer network members are. Check with the person first that they're okay with you approaching the group home or boarding house.

Most Australian communities have resources available to local people, like council-run community centres, meeting rooms at local clubs, or free Wi-Fi at local cafes. While these can be a valuable starting point, the facilitator will need to think about how to approach the people in charge of these types of venue. This isn't just about permission, it's about support. Talking to venue holders about the network goals, and also about the importance of building connections for vulnerable people with many wounds in their lives, may help to build genuine supporters, who can bring valuable resources to the peer network, and also compassion and understanding when unexpected or unwelcome things happen.

Take a moment to think about what types of resources your new peer network might need, and how you can find those resources.

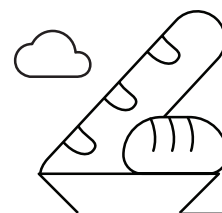
Here's a link to something called '*the Art of Asking*', which could help you think about how to approach people for help.

<https://www.family-advocacy.com/resources/the-art-of-asking/>

If you think of yourself as the key resource you may find that starting a peer network presents a number of different challenges. You may find it helpful if you have a co-facilitator such as a peer mentor, family member or staff member who you know and trust and can assist.



Go to the link wherever you see this symbol

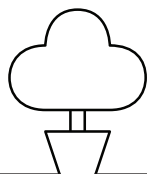


How do you invite people to your first peer network meeting?

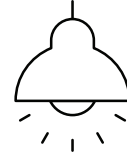
First, think about how people living in group homes and boarding houses get information. Possibilities include:

- a conversation with accommodation support staff
- a conversation with other support services who might be connecting to group home and boarding house residents to provide practical supports in health etc.
- building on the previous point, attending service centres where people might go, and to try and get introduced to the person by a member of staff there who knows them
- a notice on the local shopping mall notice board
- a community advert in the local free paper
- drop-in centres, community centres, GP surgeries, and other public places where people living in group homes and boarding houses might visit
- NDIS LACs
- NDIA
- boarding house lobbies, if they have them (check with the owner that this is okay)
- contacting the group home operator or boarding house operator and asking them to circulate the information to their residents
- word-of-mouth: telling your friends and other people in your network, who tell their friends, who tell their friends, and so on, to increase the chances the information reaches someone connected with residents in group homes and boarding houses
- local library
- tenant newsletters
- talking to people in local retail outlets, for example those selling tobacco products etc., and whose counter staff might have regular connection with people living in local group homes and boarding houses. If a person often shows up there at a fairly predictable time, it may be possible for the facilitator to be at the retail venue around the same time, and for the counter staff to help strike up an introduction.

You could try making an invitation that just talks about what will happen at the first meeting. Remember that people may not know much about peer networks and may not know you. They might be unsure about committing to meeting regularly with someone they don't know.



WELCOME



Think about the difference between these two sample invitations:

INVITATION TO JOIN A PEER NETWORK

We are setting up a peer network where people living in group homes and boarding houses can talk together and share ideas.

We are going to meet on the first Monday night every month. The first meeting is 7pm next Monday at the community centre in the high street.

We hope you can be a regular; we can all help each other.

DO YOU LIVE IN A GROUP HOME OR A BOARDING HOUSE?

Join us for a feed

We would love to share some food and talk with you about your experiences and what you think is important.

We are having a meeting at 7pm next Monday at the community centre in the high street.

For some people, the first invitation where people are asked to make a regular commitment may not be attractive, particularly for people living in group homes or boarding houses. In the second type of invitation, people are invited to have some food and talk about their experience. They are not being asked to commit beyond one meeting, and the focus is on a meal, which may be more attractive for first-timers. This may be more appealing to people who aren't interested in commitment or membership, but who may be interested in a feed.

Don't be discouraged if you don't get many people coming to the peer network at first. Indeed, it is entirely possible no one shows up at first. This will take time, so stay with it. If one person shows up, that's a start. To help make it a positive experience, make the space as welcoming as possible; have comfortable furniture and avoid setting it up in a way, such as a semi-circle, that some people might find a bit confronting. As well as some food, it might help to have a radio on, or a TV, or something that provides an anchor point for someone in the room, to help them feel welcome and comfortable.

It doesn't matter hugely if the people who turn up are there for the food rather than peer support. The important thing is that a connection has been made. Be prepared for this to be a long process – a trickle effect where hopefully people gain trust, have a positive experience and turn up regularly.



How do you make the first meeting a success?

However you invite people to your new peer network, it is important the first meeting is a success. You might think about success in these ways:

- everyone in the room was welcomed
- everyone in the room had something to eat
- everyone in the room had the chance to have their say and to be respected
- everyone in the room felt like they learnt something
- everyone in the room got the chance to meet someone new
- the conversation finished in a way that led to people want to come back for more.

Have a look at the **Peer Connect Quick Guide: How to make sure the first meeting is a success** here:



<https://www.peerconnect.org.au/setting-and-running-peer-networks/first-meeting/how-make-sure-first-meeting-success/>

Growing a peer network for people in shared living might involve tiny steps. At the first gathering, the main focus may be on the food, and there may only be a few minutes of time sharing information, and it may be that the facilitator does this one on one, by 'working the room'.

To prepare for this, the facilitator might gather some basic information to give to people, including their own contact details, perhaps information about local advocacy services, or information about when the next gathering will happen and what food will be there.

A great meeting happens when people join a conversation about something really important to them. It may be to hear a guest speaker, to hear from others about their views and experiences or to voice their concerns about an issue that impacts on them. For this group, a 'guest speaker' might be someone who also comes and 'works the room' with some basic information while people have food.

An art activity might be a way of easing into more difficult conversations and giving people an outlet for expressing what they wish to say.

Some members might enjoy a raffle where they get the chance to win a prize and take home something meaningful to them. The raffle doesn't need to involve expensive prizes, maybe just small inexpensive food items that people will find immediate value in.

The Peer Connect website has a section called '*Stuff Peer Networks talk about*' and it might be one of these topics that forms the first topic for a meeting and builds the passion for a peer network. For people living in group homes or boarding houses, the topics include things like rights, feeling safe, help with making decisions, help with advocacy, employment, meeting new people, and so on.

You can find the topics on the website here:

<https://www.peerconnect.org.au/stuff-peer-networks-talk-about/life-issues/>



As your peer network gets going, the network can encourage its members to take turns at doing the different jobs. People living in group homes and boarding houses may find it harder to share jobs that involve catering, venue-organising and so, but there are other ways peer network members can help, like coming early to help set up the room, staying back to help put things away, taking a turn in chairing the meetings, and so on. This helps all members share the ownership of the peer network. This makes the network stronger, and helps it last longer.

Case study – PWDA

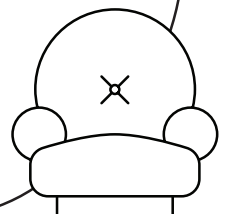
PWDA facilitated an arts-based program for a group of people with disability living in boarding houses.

The arts program was the hook to get this group participating in the community, and peer conversations were secondary to this focus. The focus of the PWDA program was to build self-advocacy and decision making skills, using drawing as the medium. For instance, the facilitator initiated a conversation about 'home' while participants were drawing and asked them to draw and reflect on what was most important to them as individuals when considering their future housing plans.

Service providers of group homes and boarding houses: are they willing?

It is important for a peer network to expect support from the providers of group homes and boarding houses. There will be service providers out there who are interested in how they can help their residents find their voice and build capacity.

However, it is also possible that some service providers are less interested in this, or are conflicted because if their residents use a peer support network and become more empowered, knowledgeable and connected, then one of the consequences of this might be that some may then decide to change their service provider. Fears about service sustainability or loss of income might result in some service providers being less willing to assist, or even presenting barriers to residents' participation in a peer network.



Ways to approach this situation include:

- Talking with the service provider about the general benefits of peer networks for their members, and therefore why it is valuable for the service provider to be supportive
- Identifying the benefits to the service provider itself of residents being more informed and empowered. These benefits might include greater participation in the running of the household, greater participation in any consultation processes the service provider runs with its residents, or the resident adding their voice to local community issues the service provider is also concerned about, such as traffic and mobility issues, community amenities, etc.
- Identifying the very specific ways the service provider can help, so that it looks achievable without undue hassle
- Identifying other people among local community leaders, community members or service providers who know the service providers in question and who may be able to help bring them on board
- In the absence of the above points being enough, exploring the availability of resources that make a resident's attendance at a peer network event less dependent on the practice support and goodwill of their service provider.



For more information

Department of Human Services – Victoria, Australia Peer Support Guide

The guide explains what peer support is and provides ideas about how to do it.



<http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/about-the-department/documents-and-resources/policies-guidelines-and-legislation/peer-support-guide>

The **Centre of Excellence in Peer Support** has great resources about Peer Support. There is a document about setting up a peer support group which you can find in the resources section here:



<http://www.peersupportvic.org/index.php/2014-12-15-22-42-49/2014-12-16-02-22-27/Resources/>

Checklist for starting a peer network

- Think about why you are starting a peer network

- Think about who you could ask to help you

- Think about what people living in group homes and boarding houses might get from the network

- Think about how you can get low or no cost resources

- Think about how the group is welcoming and accessible for all

- Think about a place to meet

- Think about the invitation to the first meeting



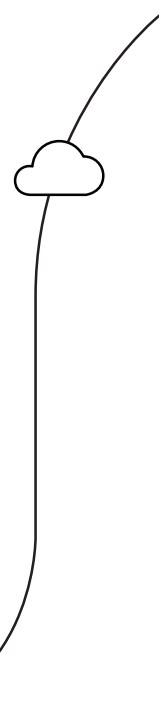


Reflection

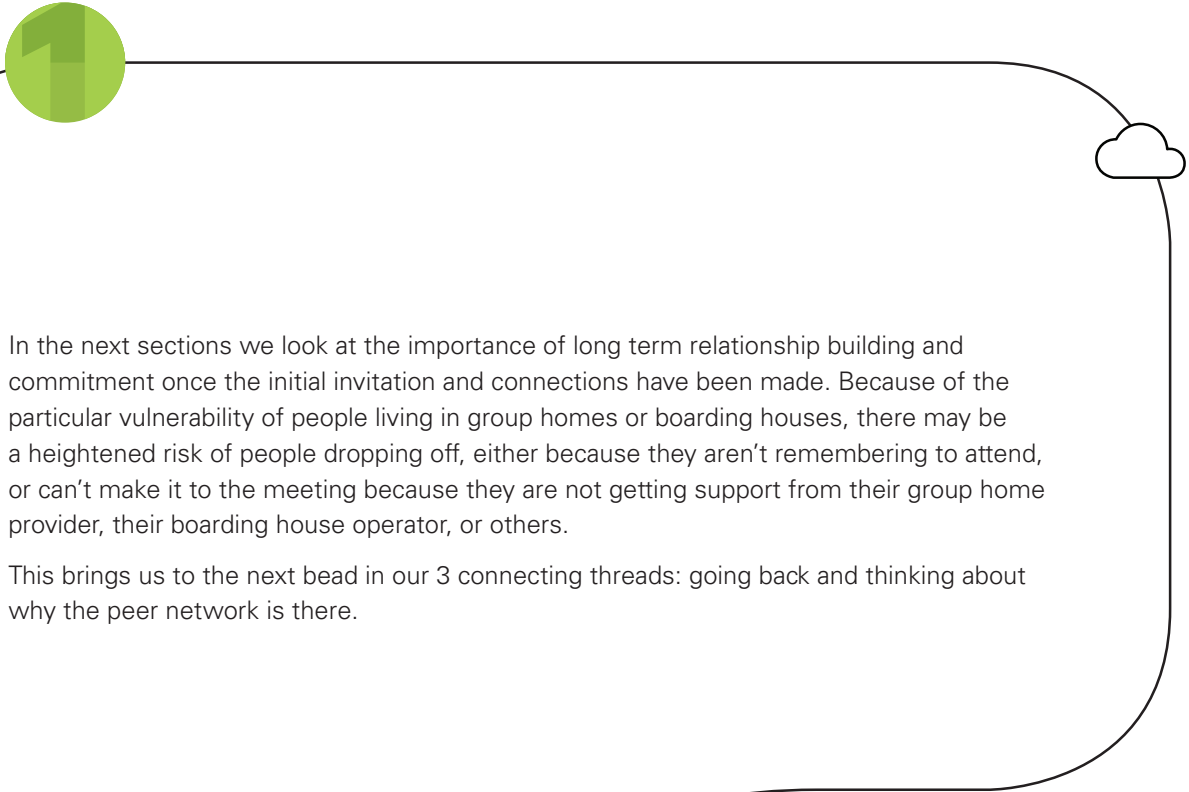
Take a moment to think about setting up a peer network.

Why are you starting it up? What do you think local people living in group homes or boarding houses might want from it? What resources will you need?

How will you invite people? How will you help them come to the meeting?



Hopefully, this section has given you some useful ideas about setting up a peer network aimed at people living in group homes and boarding houses. We have used the green bead to represent this first stage of a peer network. It is seen as the first connecting thread: the bringing of people together.



In the next sections we look at the importance of long term relationship building and commitment once the initial invitation and connections have been made. Because of the particular vulnerability of people living in group homes or boarding houses, there may be a heightened risk of people dropping off, either because they aren't remembering to attend, or can't make it to the meeting because they are not getting support from their group home provider, their boarding house operator, or others.

This brings us to the next bead in our 3 connecting threads: going back and thinking about why the peer network is there.

While the experiences might be different there was always a connecting thread. It's always coming back to finding what we have in common.

Cath Mahony CDAH

www.teamup.org.au/resources/

