

Should anyone be paid anything in your peer support network?

Introduction

It is important to consider whether paid staff or volunteers are going to develop and/or deliver your peer support network. This decision is likely to be influenced by funding availability, volunteer availability as well as the ethos of your peer support network among a range of other considerations.

Let's make it happen

Peer support networks can work really well when managed and/or led by either staff or volunteers, there is a range of issues that should be considered whenever volunteers are utilised in peer support networks, their management and delivery:

1. ***What are the benefits of utilising volunteers?*** Obviously a key benefit from utilising volunteers is the sustainability and low cost nature of the group costs if they are available and appropriately skilled. Volunteers can enable other peer support members to feel more similar to the group facilitator if they are a volunteer in the same peer group. The building of social capital is very important for the long-term sustainability of the NDIS, and having peer leaders volunteer in these roles builds this capital. In addition, the volunteer gains great skills and, therefore, this may lead to further life opportunities for the peer leader in the future which is particularly important if they are someone living with disability.
2. ***What support do volunteers require to develop and coordinate a peer support network?*** It is dependent upon the individuals' specific needs and skills, but all volunteers will require the appropriate training and support to adequately perform their role. For example, have you put together a Volunteers Manual (or something similar) which lists volunteers' rights and responsibilities? Have you considered issues such as volunteer: role descriptions, recruitment, screening, retaining, orienting, training, supervising, evaluating and rewarding?
3. ***Have you adequately matched your volunteers' skills with their role(s)?*** It is very important that volunteers are 'set up for success'. This involved undertaking appropriate matching of the volunteers' interests, talents and skills with the role you would like them to undertake. It is important to consider how your group operates and who is best suited to do this task. There are several parts to group delivery including: spreading word about the group, building membership, setting a schedule, booking (and initially finding) accessible and available venues, selecting topics for discussion (and preparing for them), preparing the room, arranging any food and/or drinks, delivering the group and providing any required support to members outside of the peer support network meetings. Do you believe the same person can do all of

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these? Are you able to be clear about what aspects of group delivery they are responsible for? Does your selected volunteer need assistance or training in some of the aspects of the role? How about centralizing or giving the more administrative aspects of the network to a different volunteer or staff member? The key consideration here is the matching between volunteer and the full role required.

4. ***What Policies and Infrastructure do volunteers require?*** If you decide to utilise volunteers in your peer support network, you are likely to require some systems in place. For example, have you secured insurance to provide them with cover if they are injured whilst undertaking volunteering for you? Can you be sure any group leader(s) is either covered for advice provided, or else knows to give standard and non-specific advice? You will also be advised to provide volunteers with guidelines about their role and responsibilities. This is often included in a Policy and Procedures Manual and should also be provided in an induction and introduction session where a checklist can be used to ensure you remember to tell them about core items such as evacuation procedures.
5. ***Do you know what checks are required for your volunteers?*** Whenever working with vulnerable people, it is important to ensure all volunteers have current and regular Police Checks in place. We urge all community organisations interested in peer support networks ensure their policies require anyone in any volunteer role meet all current check statutes and that someone in the organisation is responsible for keeping these records.
6. ***What about volunteers' out of pocket costs?*** While we know gaining adequate funding is a challenge for many peer support networks, it is important that we ask our volunteers for their time and not expect them to also contribute their own money to the peer support network. Volunteers are likely to be out of pocket if they have significant transport costs, make phone calls or send text messages to group members, are responsible for providing printed materials, are expected to access emails away from the site, and perhaps provide catering and/or drinks for the group. Consider what systems you need to have in place to ensure volunteers are reimbursed for such costs and how this will be managed to be open, equitable and fair. Do you need to create forms for this? and what records must be kept? If you do not cover out of pocket costs you will likely contravene Office for Volunteers guidelines and standards and risk losing your volunteers over time. In addition, there are grants available to assist you in covering costs such as transport and training.
7. ***Who can assist you with finding volunteers for your admin or group delivery?*** There are many opportunities to find appropriately skilled and motivated volunteers. Obviously a first consideration would be from within your own network: are there some emerging peer leaders you can support as they develop into a peer leader role? Do some members have family or friends who want to be involved in the peer support network in some capacity that may be willing and able to offer voluntary

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time? In addition, most governments offer online volunteer finding and/or matching services so you should definitely explore this option also.

8. **How can you recognize volunteers' contributions?** There are many opportunities to thank volunteers and it is beneficial to do this on a regular basis. Perhaps include a segment in your session to do so, or perhaps a story in your newsletter? What about finding out about local council or government programs to recognize volunteers and submitting an application for one of your volunteers on a regular basis? A simple 'thank you' can be greatly appreciated.
9. **How do you manage a volunteers' departure?** Volunteers naturally leave over time and this can be managed so as to minimize any disruption to the peer support network. Having backup strategies and people in place can help, and clear departure guidelines relating to handover notes, training of new volunteers and management of any physical assets should all be in place. Most importantly, thank the volunteer for their time and efforts within the peer support network and wish them the best in their future opportunities.

Overall, running a peer support network is all about people coming together and sharing. Whether the network is developed and delivered by staff or volunteers is a key decision. Volunteers potentially offering a range of important benefits to the network but you must manage them and be aware of the rights and responsibilities of volunteers.

Where you can find more information

There are lots of online resources about volunteers and their management.

Nationally, Volunteering Australia (<https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/>) is the national peak body for volunteering, working to advance volunteering in the community, and offers a range of resources online including opportunities for searching for volunteers via their initiative called 'Go Volunteer' (see <https://govolunteer.com.au/>).

Seek also offers listings of volunteering opportunities online (see <https://www.volunteer.com.au/>).

Each State Government has online resources for state based volunteering guidelines and resources. For example, in SA we have the Office for Volunteers (see <http://www.ofv.sa.gov.au/>) who deliver support programs that contribute to the government's priorities of building the capacity of community organisations to be sustainable in years to come, and encouraging all citizens to participate in community life and care for each other. State governments also provide the legislation relevant to volunteering (such as SA's *Volunteers Protection Act (2001)* available at: <https://www.legislation.sa.gov.au/LZ/C/A/VOLUNTEERS%20PROTECTION%20ACT%202001.aspx>).

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The **Community Tool Box**, From Kansas in the US, has significant information on volunteers including sections on planning to include volunteers, recruiting volunteers and developing orientation and training programs for volunteers. You can read these from this link:

<http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/structure/volunteers>.

Government Grants

There are a range of sites that provide current grant information. You can search online for specific local council, state government programs (such as

<http://www.grantassist.sa.gov.au/community> in SA) and the Australian government offers volunteer grant opportunities from time to time, and these are managed via the government's community grants hub -

<https://www.communitygrants.gov.au/grants/volunteer-grants-2016>.

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