

The Peer Support Program at Edmonton Institution for Women

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The concept of developing a Peer Support Team (PST) in a women's prison began in 1990 at Kingston's Prison for Women through the work of Jan Heney, Julie Darke and local community women. Six years after the first PST was formed, a Peer Support Team coordinator manual and a Peer Support Team volunteer manual were prepared. These manuals facilitated the development of a Peer Support Program at the Edmonton Institution for Women (EIFW) with an extensive information base. EIFW's Peer Support Program was developed and coordinated by the Psychology Department, management and inmates in December 1996. The primary concern of the PST is to offer non-judgmental support, information, help with problem-solving and referrals.²

Forging the links

The foundation of the program is its Steering Committee, which meets monthly. These meetings provide a forum for solving structural and systemic concerns, as well as for informing committee members of the PST's progress. The multidisciplinary membership of the Steering Committee allows for differing perspectives to address issues quickly. The Steering Committee also includes various levels of staff and community members, who are a vital link to community resources, such as professionals that provide instruction and guidance during the 17-session training program. Through the Steering Committee, the PST Coordinator meets two objectives: linking the PST with staff in the facility and linking the PST with members of the community.

Program success depends on PST members who are equipped for dealing with a wide range of issues. Training topics include Peer Counselling and the PST Program; Socialization; Violence in Women's Lives; Childhood Sexual Abuse; Women in Conflict

with the Law; Counselling Skills; Self-esteem and Self-care; Coping Strategies: Self-injury; Substance Abuse; Eating Disorders; Women and Anger; Suicide Intervention; Counselling Ethics; Flashbacks and Nightmares; Impact on the Counsellor; and Community and Institutional Resources.

Program evaluation

Blanchette and Eljdupovic-Guzina³ conducted a pilot study of the Peer Support Program for federally sentenced women at EIFW in October 1997. There were approximately 55 federally sentenced women in the

population at this time. A comprehensive evaluation framework was used that included a detailed evaluation of each aspect of the program (i.e., coordination, PST member participation and inmates receiving support) from various perspectives (i.e., general population inmates, PST members and staff). At the time of this evaluation, 50% of 22 respondents had used the service at least once. Recipients of peer support found it extremely helpful/fulfilling their expectations. Staff felt the Peer Support Program reinforced positive effects of other programs to a greater degree for PST members than for non-PST members.

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A further evaluative survey to determine the effectiveness of the Peer Support Program at EIFW, with 26 federally sentenced women and 13 staff members responding, was conducted by the Psychology Department in April 1999. Population at this time was approximately 65 federally sentenced women. Inmates from the general EIFW population were surveyed separately from the PST members.

Outcomes

In general, PST members tended to report the highest satisfaction and performance ratings. Using a Likert scale ranging from 1, not effective, to 5, extremely effective, PST members reported that they felt the Peer Support Program training was highly effective in preparing them for PST duties ($M = 4.25$), as well as promoting leadership ($M = 4.50$) and communication skills ($M = 4.25$). The quality of information presented on community resources was very good ($M = 4.25$), and the training session assisted in reinforcing the positive effects of other programs ($M = 4.55$). PST members estimated that they provide support to others an average of 3 to 5 hours per week. No reports were given of PST members being denied permission to respond to a call.

Performance ratings of the program given by women from the general offender population were slightly lower than those given by PST members, but remained in the above-average range. Of those surveyed, 95% stated that they were aware of the PST and knew how to request peer support services; 86% knew the identity of the individual members. The majority of inmates surveyed had requested peer support at least once. Of those who had not used peer support services, their main reason cited was that they had not yet felt any need to request such support. A small minority stated that they did not feel comfortable sharing their issues with anyone on the PST at the current time. Only one inmate reported that she had been denied access to peer support by staff. Newer inmates expressed a desire to learn more about the PST members and their training.

On average, it was reported that staff responded to inmate calls for peer support within 11 to 30 minutes, and PST members were reported to respond within the same length of time. Inmates in the Intake Unit indicated that they were very satisfied with the quality of the information delivered by

PST members during their weekly visits ($M = 4.05$). Inmates also rated PST members highly in terms of their listening skills ($M = 4.58$), problem-solving skills ($M = 3.94$), approachability ($M = 4.56$) and communication skills ($M = 4.22$). Expectations of the PST were also well met ($M = 4.28$), and those who had previously requested peer support reported that the sessions were very helpful ($M = 4.43$) in helping them deal with their issues.

Performance ratings by staff members were generally in the moderate range. Staff reported that PST members were effective in handling

crisis interventions ($M = 4.00$), providing services to other inmates ($M = 3.62$) and serving as role models ($M = 3.73$). It was also felt that the Peer Support Program training was efficient in preparing PST members for PST duties ($M = 3.77$), and in reinforcing the positive effects of other programs for PST members ($M = 3.62$) and for other inmates ($M = 3.62$). As well, staff were moderately-to-well satisfied with the sharing of PST procedures ($M = 3.62$) and PST activities and schedules ($M = 3.58$) with key institutional personnel.

A fairly high level of trust in PST members was reported ($M = 3.79$), and staff generally felt confident in referring an inmate to PST members. However, 75% of staff surveyed indicated that their trust level varied depending on individual PST members. Several new and casual staff members have shown an interest in learning more about the Peer Support Program, the training provided, and the

scope of services provided by PST members at EIFW. One staff member expressed concern that some inmates were using peer support for social purposes. However, the majority of the feedback was positive, with staff supporting the increasingly refined evaluation procedures in use. Above all, staff value the concept of women helping each other that the PST represents.

Suggestions from residents for meeting the PST's full potential included increasing the number of PST-sponsored events and services.

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Staff recommended providing more self-care sessions for PST members and increasing communication with staff to strengthen the current Peer Support Program. Additional events sponsored by the PST, which contribute to self-care, have been organized recently, such as art therapy workshops.

According to PST members, much of the Peer Support Program's success can be attributed to the establishment of positive relations between PST members and staff and between PST members and other federally sentenced women. Comments were overwhelmingly positive, and one inmate said that "[the PST members] are the best people around... they are helpful, kind, smart, and easy to get along with."

The Peer Support Program at EIFW enjoys continued success largely because of the outstanding level of commitment on the part of all those involved in the program. The training offered to team members prepares them to provide guidance and support in many areas, as well as the opportunity to use their own life experience in a positive manner. The training does more than impart knowledge on specific topics, it builds confidence in team members. The ability to trust is a problem for most federally sentenced women, creating a barrier that inhibits potential for human growth; the PST has shown its ability to gain the confidence of these women with whom they share a bond. PST members are not trained therapists and shy away from giving advice; the skill most used is that of listening. Active listening often enables the PST member to aid a fellow inmate in discovering positive solutions

to the myriad of problems faced during incarceration. A gentle reminder of potential consequences, the presence of an understanding person who will listen, the feeling of not being alone, all are often essentials missing in the lives of federally sentenced women. The Peer Support Program provides the opportunity for inmates to offer these essentials to each other.

Conclusion

A high standard is set for team membership, providing incentive for members to be mindful of their own behaviour, and therefore be role models for the general offender population. This standard has earned the Peer Support Program, and the PST, the confidence and respect of staff and residents at EIFW. The PST Coordinator and the team work diligently to maintain a clear line of communication between staff, management, community members and inmates; as a result, they receive continued support and encouragement from all levels. Peer support continues to succeed because the high level of commitment and enthusiasm in the beginning remains today. There is no doubt that the program is beneficial to the institution as well as to the community, but it is most rewarding for the inmates who use and provide this service. The program provides an opportunity for federal sentenced women to participate actively in their personal growth and rehabilitation, helping them seek and rely on the courage and wisdom within themselves...the courage and wisdom they need in order to change. ■

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² Peer Support Team, *Prepare for the Journey*. EIFW (Edmonton, AB, 1997).

³ K. Blanchette and G. Eljdupovic-Guzina, *Results of a Pilot Study of the Peer Support Program for Women Offenders*, R-73 (Ottawa, ON: Research Branch, Correctional Service of Canada, 1998).

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