

The Utilization of Peer Counselors for the Provision of Mental Health Services to the Aged

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ABSTRACT. Peer counseling has been developed as a method for addressing many of the psychological problems experienced by the elderly. This paper examines the use of peer counseling in an agency. Specifically, this paper focuses on the agency's preparation for peer counselors, the recruitment and retention of peer counselors, the training of these volunteers, and the services which they can provide to the elderly.

The mental health needs of the elderly are varied and are highly interdependent on social, environmental and physical factors. It has been estimated that between 15% and 20% of those elderly age 65 and over experience psychological problems severe enough to require intervention (Butler & Lewis, 1982; Blackwell, 1980). However, only 2% to 7% ever receive treatment through public or private agencies (Kahn, 1975; Psychiatry Practice Study Report, 1978; Dye, 1978). Fortunately, as shown by the increasing numbers of students in professional courses in gerontology, clinical interest in the elderly is increasing.

The increased interest in gerontology has resulted in much attention being given to the development of new and innovative methods

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for providing service to the aged. This may be the result of the increased emphasis on community based services to prevent inappropriate or premature placement in residential facilities. Coupled with this emphasis on prevention has been the increased awareness of the needs of older persons living in the community. One method which has received considerable attention in the literature is the use of peer counselors to provide services for the elderly.

The utilization of peer counselors has received support at the national level. At the 1981 White House Conference on Aging, recommendations included “. . . policies be encouraged and programs be developed that utilize the reservoirs of experience, insights, and wisdom of older Americans to effect social change” (p. 91). The use of peer counselors has also gained the attention of local service providers. The present atmosphere of fiscal austerity has led these agencies to evaluate both the unique skills the older volunteer has to offer and the cost effectiveness of a volunteer program.

Peer counselors focus on helping the client develop the supports necessary for independent living. Special attention is given to enhancing the client's sense of self-worth and dignity. FallCreek and Mettler (1983) have listed four services provided by the peer advocate: education, referral, supportive measures, and companionship. These services are provided in a number of settings and can serve both preventative and therapeutic purposes (Vinokur-Kaplan, 1981). Peer-advocate counseling can address the mental, emotional and social needs of the client. Subsequently, research has been drawn from all these areas. However, particular emphasis has been focused on the counseling functions which differentiate peer counseling from friendly visitor or companionship programs. This article will discuss the role of the peer counselor in an agency, from implementation of a volunteer program through supervision of volunteer activities. Specifically, this paper will examine the agency's preparation for peer counselors, the recruitment and retention of peer counselors, training of these volunteers, and services provided by them.

PREPARATION FOR PEER COUNSELING

The first step in the decision to use older persons as peer counselors requires that agency staff in charge of setting up volunteer programs be acquainted with basic knowledge about older people.

For example, thinking of the aged as a uniform and homogenous group with similar capacities can lead to serious mistakes during program development. It is necessary that agency staff be aware that as people grow older and age related events influence their thoughts and personalities, the result is a group of people who can be very different from each other in both personality and levels of physical and intellectual functioning. These differences, or possible similarities, of the volunteers should be known before deciding if the skills possessed by the volunteer are congruent with the purposes of the program being planned.

Determining whether peer counselors are appropriate for a proposed program also requires that agency staff be familiar with the volunteers capabilities. Becker and Zarit (1978) concluded that when older volunteers were trained in the use of the three core counseling skills (accurate empathy, warmth, and genuineness), the volunteer demonstrated significant growth in communicating empathy and warmth and scored above the minimum required for effective counseling in genuineness. Similarly, France and Gallagher (1984) found a significant increase in a peer counselor's use of empathy as a result of training.

Once the characteristics and potential of the volunteer are understood, it is necessary to understand the role of a peer counselor. Peer counseling is based upon the idea that, with adequate training and supervision, an older person is capable of providing the rudimentary counseling necessary to help other elderly individuals in maintaining their ability to cope by imparting the skills needed to deal with pressures associated with normal living. Bolton and Dignum-Scott (1979) have delineated the two aspects of a peer counselor. The first function of the volunteer is that of an advocate. Advocacy is used to help clients become aware of available services, to assist them in receiving needed services, and to facilitate the development of skills that are necessary for independent living. The peer counselor acts as a role model so that the clients will eventually have the confidence to become their own advocate. The second function of the volunteer is that of a counselor. This function requires that the peer counselor use the techniques of active listening and constructive response to help the clients with their concerns.

Assuming a proposed program is congruent with the talents and skills of peer counselors, it is necessary to determine whether the agency has the resources required for the volunteer program. Pitteman (1973) lists four factors which must be addressed. First, do

organizational policies and administrative practices help or hinder the volunteer? Second, what kinds of supervision are available to the volunteer? Third, what are the actual working conditions? Fourth, what services are available that support the efforts of the volunteer? Finally, agency personnel need to be educated about the role of volunteers in the agency. According to Salmon (1985), insufficiently trained staff make inadequate and ineffective use of older volunteers. Agency staff need to understand the competencies and contributions that peer counselors can make to an agency's programs. Similarly, peer counselors should not be used as a solution to budgetary problems. Rather, paid staff and volunteers have complementary roles which should be viewed as separate but equally important to the client.

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Before recruiting can begin it is necessary to understand the peer counselors' motives for volunteering their time and energy. The literature describes two general reasons why older individuals might volunteer their time to a program. First, as Wasser (1966) points out, having a purpose in life and being socially useful are as necessary to the aged person as to anyone else. Second, older individuals may be seeking new experiences which will aid them in achieving personal goals (Arthur, 1969). Such goals may include learning new skills, gaining knowledge in a particular area, or increasing interaction with others.

Peer counselors can be recruited from a variety of sources. Traditional sources of older volunteers have been retired senior volunteer programs and community service centers for the aged. However, if only these sources are used, the agency may not be truly open to all potential aged applicants because many prospective volunteers are not a part of these programs and must be contacted in other ways. Although special effort must be exerted on the part of the program to reach these individuals, increasing the number of active older people can only help fulfill the mission and mandate of many agencies.

Because the ultimate responsibility of the agency is to the client, careful consideration must be made in selecting recruits for peer counseling. Hoffman (1983) developed the following screening criteria by which to evaluate applicants. The eight basic criteria in-

clude: sixty years of age or older; good physical health; no serious depression in the preceding year; a desire to be trained and a willingness to attend all training sessions; a commitment to work as a peer counselor a minimum of three hours a week for at least six months in order to make the time spent for training cost effective for the agency; show evidence of regular attendance at a senior center; the applicant must have an eclectic rather than a religious orientation towards helping; and show evidence of flexibility. The particular criteria utilized by a given program must be chosen on the basis of the contingencies that exist in the community.

The criteria which merits further explanation is the need for an applicant to show evidence of flexibility. Hoffman (1983) found that some older volunteers who had been selected for peer counseling proved to be unable to provide services in a style compatible with the counseling principles of the program. The two reasons found for this incompatibility were an affinity for advice-giving and an inability to accept some client behaviors as a result of the volunteer's religious beliefs. It must be emphasized that the majority of peer counselors can be taught to delay advice-giving and can be made aware of the need to accept some behaviors and values with which they might not agree. Nonetheless, the criterion of flexibility is a good indicator of an ability to adapt to the agency's counseling principles.

Volunteer loss or turnover can become problematic if the peer counselors' needs are unmet. Sainer and Zander (1971) have identified eight broad guidelines for attracting and retaining volunteers. First, the opportunities available to volunteers should be matched with their experience and background. However, it should be noted that some volunteers may be looking for new experiences. In such cases, it is only necessary to determine whether they have the potential to be successful in the position. Second, volunteers should be recruited and trained on a group basis so that the volunteer has a peer group as a point of reference and as a source of identity. In addition, individuals often initially feel that there is little they can do alone; they are more optimistic about the impact of a group. Third, volunteers should be offered a variety of placements in both direct and indirect service capacities. Fourth, elaborate pre-training should be avoided because it may imply that the volunteer is being tested for acceptability. Instead, specific orientation takes place when the volunteer begins the actual task. Fifth, agency staff should give personalized attention to the volunteer. Absences should be

followed up and complaints heard. Sixth, an effort should be made to gain public recognition from the community for the services of the volunteers. In addition, the amount of status a peer counselor experiences is also directly related to the amount of recognition and support he/she receives from agency staff. Seventh, transportation and lunch should be provided so that the delivery of service does not involve expense to the volunteer. If the volunteers' activities cost the peer counselor anything more than their time, then the program will only be attracting those individuals who can afford it and will be denying the poor elderly of the opportunity to participate. Eighth, potential volunteers should not be turned away because they lack social or job skills. Experience has shown that many volunteers who appeared to be the least promising, have instead developed into the best volunteers in a supportive atmosphere. Those who have worked extensively with volunteers indicate that some recruits who appeared least promising have become the best volunteers.

TRAINING

Before an agency develops a training program it is necessary to understand the benefits of using peer counselors. Furstenburg (1980) identified three reasons why the elderly prefer to discuss their health problems with peers. First, it was determined that the clients viewed the situation as a suitable source for meeting social needs. Second, peer counseling is an equalized exchange. Older individuals often have difficulty discussing problems with younger people because this is seen as burdening them. Three, older volunteers have a greater familiarity with chronic illnesses. The previous reasons are as equally applicable to mental health, however, there are additional advantages unique to peer counseling. Older volunteers are viewed by the client as giving a gift of themselves and are not viewed as just being paid to listen to them. Also, peer counselors are more likely to share useful information from their own experiences. Similarly, Toseland (1979) found that peer counselors are better able to relate to problems caused by the aging process. It is not only helpful for program staff to be aware of these advantages, it can also provide the volunteers with the confidence that they have life experiences that are helpful in counseling.

The skills just discussed are important to remember when designing a training program. As Marshall (1983) points out, "Far too often social workers are looking for volunteers who are simply unpaid versions of ourselves" (p. 23). The elderly have attained a degree of maturity and balance as a result of life experiences. It is these attributes and skills which provide the cornerstone on which training must build.

There are several specific factors to consider when training older individuals. Many volunteers have never been in the work force or have been away from it for some time and may question their ability to fulfill the role of volunteer. This performance anxiety takes two forms. First, individuals may be very worried about learning everything, which may actually decrease their capacity to learn new ideas. These individuals must be reassured that there is plenty of time to learn the material and that much learning occurs while talking to clients. Second, some individuals may be wary of role playing situations for fear of making a mistake. It is recommended that the trainer not participate in the role play as the counselor because this sets up high expectations and the peer counselors often try to emulate the trainer's style rather than developing their own. It is preferable to begin the role play with a peer counselor who feels comfortable in front of people.

Because a large proportion of the elderly are female, some specific training should be provided concerning counseling women. Ten guidelines were developed by Wolfeat (1980) that must be considered when dealing with elderly women. For the purposes of this paper, these have been condensed into five general guidelines. First, many elderly women may believe that they deserve little from life because they are female. The counselor, therefore, should indicate that this is untrue and should use every opportunity to affirm the elderly woman's sense of worth and to help her develop a positive self-image. Second, because of the current attacks being made on the traditional feminine roles, counselors should help these women gain confidence in their ability to choose and implement the roles they desire in their older years. Third, counselors can help older women understand that they need not feel inferior as a result of the ageist and sexist attitudes of society. Fourth, the traditional female attribute of depending on others, especially males, results in an inability to formulate personal goals and expectations. In addition to helping the client develop effective problem-solving strategies, the peer counselor should insure that work is being accomplished

within a goal framework that has been explicitly negotiated with the client. Fifth, many elderly women may have never taken themselves, their ideas, or their goals seriously. Counselors can help these women achieve the fulfillment of taking responsibility for their own lives.

Because peer counselors often work within the community, they should be well acquainted with the resources available in the community. They should also be given training in the outreach and referral process. Older volunteers often come from the same community as their clients and therefore can be effective in outreach efforts. According to Parish and Landsberg (1984) an active outreach program can identify problems in their early stages of development and thus help to avoid the premature institutionalization of older community members. As Santos (1984) points out, they must be prepared to identify clients' problems and direct them to appropriate services, particularly in cases that require assistance beyond the peer counselor's capabilities.

The optimum amount of training is a series of one hour meetings held twice a week for eight weeks. Volunteers should be given an outline of the training program. This provides the older volunteer with extra time to absorb the material without requiring extended periods of time. Conducting training during the day is also recommended due to security reasons.

PROVISION OF SERVICES

Peer counselors are competent in many areas and provide a variety of services to the elderly. David and Ehrenpreis (1981) have identified eight specialized mental health functions at which paraprofessionals are competent, and peer counselors can perform given adequate training. The first function discussed is information gathering. The peer counselor has the ability to gather relevant information through observation and interviewing and to accurately record this information. The second function is the ability to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the client and to determine the appropriate service intervention. The third function is the peer counselor's ability to assist clients in solving problems and/or changing behavior. The fourth function involves programming skills, which include the ability to plan, implement, and evaluate appropriate activities which cover a wide range of interests and levels of functioning. The

fifth function involves the peer counselor's understanding of group dynamics and the ability to facilitate formal and informal groups. The sixth function is a familiarity with community resources that can be used as referrals, which includes the ability to recognize signs and symptoms indicating need for professional attention. The seventh function involves acting as an advocate for the clients. This necessitates an understanding of the legal rights of citizens and the channels used to secure those rights while upholding the clients right to self-determination and not creating a dependent situation. The eighth function is an ability to provide case management services, including helping clients coordinate services from various programs and agencies.

The counseling maxim that the location should serve the needs of the client and the goals of the casework contract is especially relevant to peer counseling. This is a result of the outreach efforts that must often be made when services are provided in the client's home. Services provided by peer counselors are markedly different than those provided by professionals. To better understand these differences, it is helpful to begin with a review of the characteristics of natural helpers. Many peer counselors have previously acted as natural helpers and often share common interpersonal styles. Patterson and Brennan (1983) found that older natural helpers are less likely to try and categorize events; pay more attention to historical background; tend to believe in an orderly universe; take a more general view of problems; and tended to regard people on an individual basis. There are several implications for an individual who is operating a peer counseling program. First, those practices which are beneficial to the counseling experience must be reinforced. Similarly, it is important for peer counselors to allow clients to do as much as possible, even though it requires more time, in order to preserve the client's dignity (Calsyn, 1984). Second, excessive theoretical grounding should be avoided in order to preserve the conversational atmosphere of the peer counselor's meeting with the client. Third, peer counselors should be cautioned against providing too many favors in the form of chore services. These "favors" tend to require too much time and may furnish the clients with a defense against talking about their problems. Fourth, self-help skills should be the focus of intervention, because as Toseland (1979) found, the acquisition of these skills is directly related to increased self-esteem. Once the peer counselor and client have resolved the immediate social service needs, attention can be given to helping clients

increase their social supports. The work of Bennett (1980) has shown that social isolation due to failing health is correlated with a decline in morale and/or psychological functioning. Peer counselors can educate clients about available social supports and can help in the selection of supports which best meet client needs. In addition, they can help develop social skills which facilitate access to these supports and can encourage the clients' efforts at broadening their support system.

Finally, peer counselors can provide referrals for problems and situations that they are not knowledgeable about. As noted previously, this requires a knowledge of available community resources. In addition, peer counselors can assess those factors which aid in receiving services (i.e., physical ability, finances, family support). They can also determine if there are any barriers which hinder receiving services (i.e., availability, fear, lack of knowledge). It is recommended that the peer counselor's caseload does not exceed four to six clients, in order to prevent the volunteer from being overwhelmed.

SUMMARY

The introduction of peer counselors into an agency can be a viable resource in meeting the mental health needs of the elderly and allowing the elderly to function independently in the community. Elderly volunteers often have the time, special skills, and commitment to offer agencies and their clients. They can provide a variety of specialized mental health functions which can augment the services of professional staff. In return, the volunteers benefit from new learning experiences, personal growth, and a sense of making meaningful contributions to the lives of the elderly clients whom they serve.

This paper has addressed the use of peer counseling in an agency and the role of the agency in incorporating this mode of service into its operation. When agency staff are prepared for the elderly volunteers and for offering peer counseling services, and when elderly volunteers are properly recruited, trained, supervised and assigned to appropriate roles, the agency, staff, clients, and the volunteers all benefit. Thus, given the increased growth in the elderly population and the subsequent need for services, coupled with declining finan-

cial resources, peer counseling could become a very worthwhile mental health service offered by agencies serving the elderly.

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