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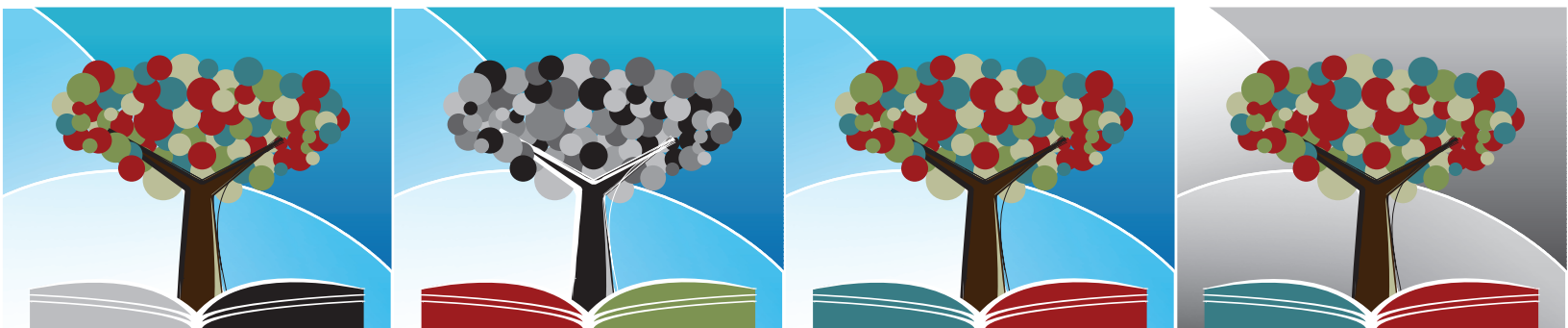
Ex-offenders as Peer Volunteers: Promising Practices for Community-based Programs
Research Report

Dr. William Morrison
Dr. Cynthia Doucet
University of New Brunswick

and

Joanne L. Murray
John Howard Society of Greater Moncton Inc.

Canada

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Introduction

In May 2005, the John Howard Society of Greater Moncton undertook research in collaboration with the University of New Brunswick to identify promising practices related to recruitment and placement of ex-offenders as peer volunteers in community-based rehabilitation programs. We hope that the findings from this research will help community-based agencies develop policies and procedures to support peer volunteer programs.

The research consisted of four phases:

- a review of peer-reviewed literature and program delivery publications;
- interviews with key informants who were service providers involved in the delivery of community-based rehabilitation programs;
- focus groups with existing and former clients (the majority being peer volunteers) who had attended community-based rehabilitation and support programs in four Canadian regions; and
- an analysis of convergent themes relating to service delivery and practices that emerged from the data collection.

This report provides a summary of findings from this research. The first section presents a review of the relevant literature on peer volunteer programs involving ex-offenders. The second section documents the perspectives of community service providers regarding the development and implementation of peer volunteer programs. The third section summarizes the feedback received from focus group participants regarding their involvement as clients and volunteers in community-based rehabilitation programs. The fourth and final section outlines the themes that emerged from the research that may serve as guidelines for practitioners and policy makers who are involved with or who plan to initiate volunteer programs with ex-offenders.

Literature review

Introduction

For the literature review, we identified recent (i.e., written or published between 1995 and 2005) professional and research documents from both Canadian and international sources. These included professionally reviewed research documents, summary and literature review articles, program evaluations, and other documents related to the design and delivery of peer volunteer programs involving ex-offenders. Evidence-based documents were drawn from published information and articles in recognized publications, as well as from recent unpublished reviews by practitioners and service providers who are responsible for recruiting and managing volunteers.

We paid particular attention to identifying studies and reports related to peer volunteer initiatives within the context of community-based rehabilitation and to documents that outlined specific recommendations related to peer volunteer selection, training, and evaluation.

In general, current accessible sources of information were descriptive and focused on the rationale, theoretical perspectives, and recognized benefits associated with peer volunteer programs involving ex-offenders. Guidelines and program descriptions often lacked detail but were useful in identifying the varied peer volunteer possibilities for ex-offenders and the wide range of issues related to developing and implementing peer volunteer programs. Empirical studies designed to evaluate the effectiveness of these programs were largely absent from the literature we reviewed, pointing to an area for future research.

The following provides a synthesis of the literature that we examined for this research. We begin with a discussion of the barriers to, benefits of, and rationale for use of peer volunteers, followed by descriptions of peer volunteer activities and initiatives. We then give an overview of key issues related to the recruitment and selection, training, and supervision of peer volunteers. Finally, we introduce potential methods of evaluation that can be applied to peer volunteer programs.

Volunteering and inclusiveness

The question of inclusiveness has become a key issue in volunteering in recent years. Although all different kinds of people volunteer, some are more likely than others to participate in structured volunteer programs. A recent study investigating the inclusiveness of volunteering indicated that specific groups are under-represented in formal volunteering and are subsequently at risk of "social exclusion." In particular, individuals who had participated in community-based rehabilitation programs or who had made the transition from justice or secure custodial settings were among those who reported barriers to becoming volunteers (Smith, Ellis, Howlett, & O'Brien, 2005).

Smith et al. (2005) reported that, in general, ex-offenders lacked formal experience with volunteering and many did not identify volunteering as an activity that was relevant to their lives. They reported barriers to volunteering including having to make a commitment to sign up for regular "regimented" volunteer activities and a lack of confidence in new environments and relationships. Ex-offenders also mentioned that many agencies and program staff would not welcome their involvement as volunteers because of their past conflict with the law. Many

ex-offenders reported that they were not aware of volunteer opportunities, nor had they been asked to volunteer. Other barriers included lengthy recruitment and selection procedures and the potential out-of-pocket costs associated with volunteering (e.g., transportation costs). When asked what would reduce specific barriers and make volunteering more inclusive, ex-offenders indicated that volunteering should:

- be an enjoyable experience;
- include training opportunities;
- provide opportunities to apply and learn new skills;
- contribute to employment readiness;
- offer recognition and incentives;
- involve support from staff and peers; and
- foster teamwork.

Benefits associated with ex-offenders as peer volunteers

Offenders have traditionally been regarded as "passive participants" in the rehabilitation of their peers. The resources of these individuals are often not considered when designing and delivering services to enhance or extend the therapeutic or recovery process of others (Devilly, Sorbello, Eccleston, & Ward, 2005). Volunteering, by contrast, is a form of "active citizenship" in which volunteers extend valuable services to other members of their community. Many theorists have stressed the potential therapeutic benefits of having ex-offenders participate in volunteer opportunities designed to support their peers in the community setting. The benefits include:

- Volunteer programs provide a forum in which peer volunteers can learn and practice new skills within a supportive environment (Fraser & Watkins, 2004).

- Volunteering provides ex-offenders with the opportunity to be positive role models for their peers and to demonstrate to others that "lives can be turned around" in the community (Fraser & Watkins, 2004).

- Volunteering provides ex-offenders with a sense of empowerment and fulfilment that they may have sought unsuccessfully through former lifestyle behaviours and choices (Maruna, 2001).

- Peer volunteering involves "caring for and feeling cared about." Such interactions foster a sense of acceptance and belonging for both the volunteer and recipient (Four Pillars Coalition, 2004).

- Peer volunteers are often viewed by program recipients as "credible" and "trustworthy" because they have shared similar experiences or circumstances (Health Canada, 2001).

- The use of peer volunteers encourages program participants to be "honest" and to take "responsibility" for their actions (Four Pillars Coalition, 2004).

- Peer volunteers may play an important role in helping others disengage from relationships or circumstances that are detrimental to their rehabilitation process in a community setting (White, 2004).

- Peer volunteers help program participants develop the positive linkages within the community that provide encouragement and that support their rehabilitation efforts (Alberta Seventh Step Society, 2005).

Key terms and definitions

In the context of rehabilitation programs, the term "peer" is often used to describe a person who has first-hand knowledge and experience of the recovery process. These individuals are sometimes referred to as potential "recovery guides" for others because they have in-depth, personal understanding of the challenges associated with rehabilitation (White, 2004).

The term "peer credentials" refers to the lessons that a person has learned that could be used to help others. As White (2004) explained,

> "It is not the experience of being wounded or having transcended such wounds that constitute a credential. It is the extraction of lessons from the experience that can aid others, and a new ethic that transforms learning into service to others." (p. 6)

These terms emphasize not only the importance of the common experience shared by peer volunteers and their clients, but also the desire to turn lessons into effective and ethical service to others. Community-based rehabilitation programs that invite the participation of former clients in their service-delivery efforts must take steps to prepare these volunteers for their responsibilities.

The terms "peer education" and "peer educator" imply that peer credentials have been put into practice within the context of a program or service delivery system. The term "peer education" describes the wide range of roles of the "peer educator," including training, facilitation, counselling, modelling, and helping (Devilly et al., 2005).

The rationale for peer-based volunteer programs: Theoretical and research perspectives

The rationale for peer-based volunteer programs is based largely on concepts from social learning theory, social inoculation theory, differential association theory, and strength-based perspectives (Devilly, Sorbello, Eccleston & Ward, 2005; Maruna & LeBel, 2003).

Social learning theory asserts that change is possible only if people have a model that they can observe and on which they can base new behaviours until they are confident enough to perform them on their own. The effectiveness of the model is determined by its attributes, the characteristics of the observers, and the perceived consequences of undertaking the new behaviours. From a theoretical perspective, offenders may respond more favourably to individuals who have had experiences similar to their own and who have been successful in the community setting. Hence, ex-offenders who have reformed successfully may be viewed as credible role models and may be more effective than other role models in reinforcing positive behaviour change (Devilly et al., 2005; Turner & Shepherd, 1999).

Social inoculation theory posits that individuals do not naturally desire to pursue unhealthy behaviours (e.g., substance abuse), but often do so because they lack the internal capacity or skills to resist social pressures. In contrast, individuals who have developed "arguments" to counter these pressures are viewed as having been "inoculated" against such influences. According to Devilly et al. (2005), arguments provided by peer offenders who have dealt successfully with such pressures may be seen as

more realistic and acceptable than reasons delivered by helping professionals or other identified experts.

Differential association theory combines key concepts from both social learning theory and social inoculation theory. It asserts that criminal behaviour is learned in social situations in which individuals identify closely with peers who model, teach, or reinforce criminal attitudes, values, rationalizations, and behaviours. Differential association theory argues that peers could also have a powerful influence in promoting and shaping pro-social values (Turner & Shepherd, 1999).

The *strength-based perspective* recognizes the potential of individuals who have left behind a "deviant career" by replacing it with a commitment to help and make a difference in the lives of others (Maruna & LeBel, 2003).

These theoretical models have been put into practice in twelve-step programs that emphasize the power and therapeutic benefits of helping one's peers in the recovery or treatment process. In these programs, participants who have had some measure of success assume the role of sponsors and become mentors and teachers for new members (Maruna & LeBel, 2003). This "helper principle" has also been widely used in substance abuse treatment and in correctional sites. This model encourages peers to demonstrate responsible understanding and concern for one another. Therapeutic community members are active in confronting behaviour that interferes with recovery or treatment. Small group meetings provide the forum in which members are encouraged to take responsibility for personal change and growth (Broekaert, Van der Straten, D'oosterlinck, & Kooyman, 1999; Vandevelde, Broekaert, Yates, & Kooyman, 2004).

Some research has investigated the relationships among volunteering, peer helping, and the rehabilitation of offenders. For example, Uggen and Janikula (1999) reported that those who volunteer are less likely to be arrested, even allowing for the effects of anti-social, pro-social, and conventional attitudes and behaviours. Maruna (2001) found that, compared to active offenders, ex-offenders who successfully reformed in the community demonstrated significantly more caring and other-centred attitudes. They were also more focused on making a contribution to the wider community. In general, sentencing options that have focused on community service have been consistently more effective in reducing subsequent conflict with the law compared to traditional probation or other sanctions (Rex, 2001). The potential effectiveness of peer-based volunteer approaches within community-based rehabilitation programs has also been reported anecdotally by a wide range of nonprofit organizations, including the well-known Delancey Street program (Boschee & Jones, 2000).

Potential types of peer volunteer activities

Peer volunteer approaches can be applied to a wide range of community-based rehabilitation activities. Some of the activities that we identified through the literature search are discussed below:

Peer coaching and direct helping: White (2004) provides a detailed description of the peer volunteer as a rehabilitation or recovery coach. This involves being a consultant and advocate for clients. In this capacity, volunteers are active in:
- extending personal support and encouragement;
- brainstorming possibilities for problem-solving;
- helping individuals or family members gain access to services and programs;

- providing straightforward feedback to clients as they undertake new plans; and
- acknowledging and celebrating clients' accomplishments.

Administrative support roles: Former program participants may be given the opportunity to help with the administrative or operational aspects of an organization. This might include providing reception services such as meeting people and answering phones, or administrative services such as copying, filing, or organizing material (LINC Society, 2006; Trautmann, 1995).

Presentations to community groups: Peer volunteers may also serve as speakers for community groups and schools on a wide range of issues, including drug and alcohol abuse, the consequences of being in conflict with the law, and treatment and recovery (Storrs, 1995).

Outreach/in-reach services: In peer or indigenous outreach, members of a peer group or social network reach out to others to provide education or other forms of support. Outreach by peers has been viewed as particularly beneficial in reaching clients who would not be open to traditional outreach methods (Health Canada, 2001; Rhodes, 1996). Some outreach programs may focus on community-based rehabilitation efforts. In-reach support helps individuals in custodial settings as they prepare for re-entry to the community (LINC Society, 2006).

Support group services: Community-based support programs are organized to help participants reintegrate into the community after being in custodial settings. In support groups, volunteers and program participants meet to provide support to one another, to share struggles and challenges, and to celebrate the accomplishments of those in the program. Volunteers facilitate the group and, at appropriate times, share lessons from their own experiences that provide hope and potential direction to clients (LINC Society, 2006; Trautmann, 1995).

Crime prevention programs: Some programs involve ex-offenders as peer helpers and volunteers in crime prevention programs for youth who have been in conflict with the law. This may include participation in structured after-school recreational and sports-related activities. Peer volunteers in these groups need specialized training that includes knowledge of child protection issues and appropriate accreditations/expertise for coaching or leading recreational programs (Fraser & Watkins, 2004).

Community improvement activities: Some peer volunteer programs involve participants in community projects that improve the social conditions of clients or other community members. Activities may include building projects, home repairs, helping with yard work, or providing basic necessities to those in need (e.g., at a soup kitchen or a homeless shelter; LINC Society, 2006)

Peer-led workshops/educational sessions: Peer volunteers can play an active role in sharing educational information or delivering instructional workshops dealing with topics such as how to develop problem-solving skills, how to build self-esteem, career exploration/readiness, health issues/self-care, and communication skills (Bentley, 2000; Boschee & Jones, 2000; Pioneer Human Services, 2005).

Preliminary planning and development

In designing a peer volunteer program, it is often helpful to establish a committee to guide the program's development and planning. This committee should ideally be composed of individuals who have training and experience in volunteerism, peer education training, corrections, and community-based treatment. In addition, ex-offenders who have had successful peer volunteer experiences may serve as valuable resources to the committee (Devilly et al., 2005).

Preliminary planning should address staff training (e.g., roles and responsibilities in the peer volunteer program), the nature of peer volunteer activities (e.g., types of activities, duration of service, scope of responsibilities), ethical issues (e.g., peer-client confidentiality, professional/volunteer role boundaries, limits of competence), and peer recruitment (e.g., selection methods and process; Devilly et al., 2005).

With regard to professional boundaries, the peer volunteer should not become emotionally involved in the struggles of their peers to the point of it being an ineffective professional relationship. Peer volunteers should not be stretched to the limits of their competence (i.e., overburdened with tasks or responsibilities that may be beyond their current skills). Often peer volunteers are selected because of their lived experiences, but in carrying out their duties they might have to use computers when they have little or no experience of computing. They may be asked to participate in meetings that may be intimidating if they do not have experience of such gatherings and their associated protocols. Staff members need to be sensitive to these issues and ensure that skills and competence are built up gradually so that the peer volunteer feels confident to undertake new tasks.

Recruitment and selection

The recruitment process should be as easy as possible for all volunteers. It should emphasize personal contact through informal conversation and in-person interviews rather than filling out forms. These in-person meetings should explore the applicant's readiness to become involved in structured volunteering (Smith et al., 2005). Areas for consideration include relevance of past offences, limitations associated with vulnerable populations, skills and background, motivation and stability, and references (Volunteering England, 2006). We discuss each of these areas below.

Relevance of past offences

In-person meetings with potential volunteers who have past criminal convictions should explore the circumstances of their offences and their potential relevance to specific volunteer opportunities. Questions might include:

- How serious was the offence?
- How long has it been since the offence occurred?
- What were the circumstances surrounding the offence?
- Is the behaviour that constituted the offence still a concern?
- Does the applicant have a pattern of offending behaviour?
- Have the individual's circumstances changed?
- What is the applicant's attitude toward the offences? Does the applicant take responsibility for any harm caused?

Limitations associated with vulnerable populations

Because of previous offences, placements that require involvement with or access to specific vulnerable populations (e.g., seniors, children, youth, the disabled, the ill) may not be appropriate for some ex-offenders. Criminal checks and personal disclosures can ensure that volunteers and program participants are not placed in positions of risk. For example, individuals who have committed a previous offence against youth should not be placed with younger people (Fraser & Watkins, 2004; Volunteering England, 2006).

Skills and background

Specific attention should be given to matching the skills and strengths of the volunteer with the volunteer setting. In some instances, training may be required to help the volunteer prepare for the volunteer activity (Volunteering England, 2006).

Motivation and stability

Various volunteer agencies have emphasized the importance of the personal readiness and motivations of the ex-offender to be a volunteer and an effective model for others. Some organizations require that the volunteer applicant demonstrate:

* a personal commitment to a changed lifestyle;
* adherence to the peer helping process and routines as established by the program;
* acceptance of and respect for all offenders, ex-offenders, and professionals involved in the program or rehabilitation activities;
* a willingness to learn new attitudes and skills; and
* a willingness to abide by laws regardless of personal or moral convictions (Alberta Seventh Step Society, 2005).

Devilly et al. (2005) assert that peer volunteers should demonstrate a period of "stable" commitment to the program before they participate in volunteer activities. They also suggest that recruitment procedures should take into account specific behaviours or attitudes that might interfere with program delivery or with the ability of the individual to carry out the responsibilities of a peer volunteer. In particular, they note that offenders who have significant mental health issues may have difficulty consistently meeting the expectations and demands of peer volunteering. Devilly et al. advise that the selection process should consist of two stages: first, peer applicants are chosen for training and, second, they must successfully complete the training program.

References

Additional information about the volunteer applicant can be gathered from the applicant's personal references. Discrepancies between what the applicant says and what the references say should be clarified before any decision is made about the volunteer's application or placement (Volunteering England, 2006).

Volunteer training, supervision, and support

Devilly et al. (2005) assert that peer volunteers should be adequately trained to fulfill their assigned responsibilities. Failure to prepare volunteers leaves them open to negative reactions from both program participants and staff members. Comprehensive training programs may last for one week or for several weeks (Rhodes, 1996), may include a wide range of instructional themes, and should be tailored to the unique needs of the agency providing the service. Training content might include:

- volunteer roles: rewards and responsibilities of helping (Bentley, 2000);
- organizational skills: setting goals and establishing priorities, keeping records, and reporting (Bentley, 2000);
- communication and effective listening skills (Devilly et al., 2005; Rhodes, 1996);
- basic helping and information-giving skills (e.g., providing practical guidance to a client as to where to find a particular information resource) (Rhodes, 1996);
- motivational interviewing (Storrs, 1995);
- team work (Fraser & Watkins, 2004);
- understanding and linking with existing community services (Bentley, 2000; Rhodes, 1996);
- how to develop self-esteem/self-worth (Bentley, 2000; Devilly et al., 2005);
- individual and small group facilitation (Bentley, 2000; Devilly et al., 2005);
- approaches to problem-solving (Bentley, 2000);
- program and community-based protocols (Rhodes, 1996);
- managing criticism (Bentley, 2000);
- self-care and coping (Bentley, 2000);
- how to prevent and manage relapses (Rhodes 1996; Storrs, 1995); and
- ethics, human rights, professional boundaries, and legal issues (Bentley, 2000; Devilly et al., 2005; Fraser & Watkins, 2004).

Several theorists support the use of time-limited, workshop-style training sessions (approximately three hours in length) that could form the basis for a series of instructional sessions carried out over a period of time. In lieu of a lecture-type delivery approach, several stressed that workshops should include personnel demonstrations, discussions with participants, role-playing, and skill-building exercises (Bentley, 2000; Trautmann, 1995). Meaningful and practical homework activities could also be assigned for each session and reviewed at subsequent meetings (Bentley, 2000). The use of training incentives and recognition (e.g., certificates of workshop completion) to encourage ongoing participation in the training program was also highlighted as beneficial. Finally, the role of the trainer was described in terms of providing guidance and facilitation, and ensuring that participants have an accurate understanding of the key training concepts and skills (Trautmann, 1995).

In addition to initial training, volunteer programs may also include a probationary period of several months. In most cases, ongoing support, training, and supervision should be included as part of the regular programming for peer volunteers (Rhodes, 1996; Storrs, 1995). Storrs (1995) cites examples in which trainers return to the service delivery site to meet with peer helpers to discuss how they are applying the skills they have learned. Other approaches involve scheduling regular meetings during which peer volunteers may seek consultation from program consultants or staff on issues related to their volunteering activities or their own concerns. According to Cowie and Wallace (2000), these consultation opportunities are critical to ensuring the safety and welfare of both the volunteers and the peers they serve.

Devilly et al. (2005) acknowledge the difficulties associated with directly monitoring peer volunteer and client interactions; however, organizations should have in place mechanisms for peer volunteer supervision and support. The process of supervision should be comfortable for volunteers and should allow them to share their concerns or seek assistance.

Peers should also be encouraged to work within the limits of their training and expertise and to refer to program staff when issues go beyond their own volunteer roles.

Challenges associated with peer volunteering

One of the key areas of concern with respect to peer-related programming is the potential relapse of peer volunteers. Risk of relapse may be of particular concern when peer volunteers are exposed to situations or influences to which they are vulnerable (Best, Hernando, Gossop, Sidwell, & Strang, 2003; Rhodes, 1996). In addressing these areas of concern, Rhodes stressed the importance of being proactive and attending to potential problem areas as part of initial volunteer training, and through ongoing supervision and support activities. In addition, peer volunteers' lack of familiarly with program protocols may also result in potential conflicts or strained relationships with program staff. Initial training and ongoing supervision and support activities are essential for responding effectively to such program delivery issues (Rhodes, 1996).

Evaluation

Peer-volunteer initiatives should be regularly reviewed to ensure that they are efficient and effective. Continuous relevant information gathering and review provide the means to be accountable to program users, peer volunteers, program personnel, and community stakeholders (Hollin, 1995). Three types of program evaluation may be considered.

Program monitoring

This approach to evaluation provides feedback on the daily operations of the program. Information for program monitoring is often gathered through daily activity records that document the nature of the volunteer service delivered; the location, duration, type of support provided; and the extent to which the service was helpful to clients (Rhodes, 1996).

Process evaluation

This approach to evaluation focuses on how effectively the volunteer service is being implemented and to what extent it reflects the assumptions, objectives, and activities of the original program design. Process evaluations may also make use of data gathered as a result of program monitoring, and may supplement this information with interviews with clients, volunteers, program staff, and other stakeholders (Devilly et al., 2005; Rhodes, 1996).

Outcome evaluation

This type of evaluation investigates the short-term, medium-term, and/or long-term impact of the volunteer program. This may include positive changes in the functioning of both clients and peer volunteers. Outcome evaluations often entail the collection of follow-up data over time and comparison with other programs (Devilly et al., 2005; Rhodes, 1996).

Summary

Ex-offenders have been under-represented in formal volunteering in the community. Theorists and practitioners have recognized the potential therapeutic benefits of having ex-offenders participate in volunteer opportunities designed to support the rehabilitation of their peers in the community setting. Over the past several decades, a range of organizations have embraced the "helper principle" within both community-based and correctional rehabilitation programs. Current literature provides insights into varied peer volunteering possibilities for ex-offenders and identifies key issues and concerns related to the delivery of peer volunteer programs.

Key informant interviews

Introduction

The purpose of this phase of the research was to consult key informants who had been active in developing and implementing peer volunteer programs.

Methodology

Potential key informants were identified through consultation with various national organizations that specialize in the delivery of rehabilitation programs for ex-offenders. Consultations were initially undertaken with the national John Howard Society network, which comprises over 60 national, provincial, and local societies throughout Canada. Additional consultation was done with the Salvation Army network of service providers.

The resulting key informant list comprised managers, frontline workers, and community volunteers who had direct involvement in or who operated community-based rehabilitation programs for ex-offenders. Key informants were identified from all major Canadian regions, and efforts were made to ensure that they represented the public, nonprofit, and volunteer sectors.

We made initial phone contact with all key informants to review the purpose of the research and their potential participation in it. After obtaining their consent, we arranged individual interview times. Twenty-one interviews were conducted by telephone in either French or English, according to the preference of interviewees. The semi-structured interview included a range of open-ended questions and more focused questions that were intended to elicit information about innovative approaches and programs that address the development and delivery

of peer volunteer community-based rehabilitative programs for ex-offenders.

Responses from each key informant were recorded to produce a written summary for each interview. The individual responses with regard to each of our questions were merged. We then analyzed this merged data to identify key themes.

The findings from this phase of the research are presented in the following sections and organized under the following major themes:

- background of key informants;
- benefits of ex-offenders as volunteers;
- types of peer volunteer roles and activities;
- guidelines for selection and recruitment of peer volunteers;
- skill development and training areas;
- support strategies for peer volunteers;
- challenges associated with peer volunteer approaches;
- agency readiness for peer volunteer programs; and
- evaluation and sustainability.

Background of key informants

Our key informants represented a wide range of public, nonprofit, and volunteer organizations that were involved in providing community-based rehabilitation services for ex-offenders. On average, participants had been in their current position for eight years. They came from all regions of the country. Tables 1, 2, and 3 provide a summary of key informants' work titles, training and academic background, and location.

Table 1: Current positions held by key informants

Current Title	Number of Key Informants
Director, nonprofit agency	8
Program co-ordinator, case manager	4
Chaplain	3
Manager. director, correctional services	4
Member of a community advisory board	2
Total	21

Table 2: Training and background of key informants

Training and Background	Number of Key Informants*
Criminal justice, criminology, corrections	7
Social work, human services	6
Child and youth care	4
Psychology	3
Education	2
Public administration, management	2
Total	24

*Total adds up to more than 21 because some key informants had a background in more than one area.

Table 3: Geographical distribution of key informants

Geographic Location	Number of Key Informants
Eastern Canada	9
Central Canada	6
Prairies	4
Western Canada	2
Total	21

Benefits of ex-offenders as volunteers

A rationale for volunteering

In responding to questions about the rationale for peer programs, some key informants (6)[1] indicated that many ex-offenders are not adequately prepared to re-enter the community following their time in secure settings. Even though many offenders participate in programs on the "inside," this does not ensure that they are ready to address the social challenges associated with their return to the community (4). Some key informants (3) also suggested that individuals who have spent substantial time in incarceration often have had little exposure to positive community values such as dignity, trust, and caring. Some (3) noted that correctional transitional programs have embraced volunteering as a means for offenders and ex-offenders to gain exposure to positive community behaviours and values (e.g., being on time, expressing appreciation, serving others). Some key informants (8) said that volunteering provides offenders and ex-offenders with the opportunity to interact and build positive relationships with

individuals on the "outside," and to relearn and reinforce pro-social attitudes and behaviours that are critical to their success in the community.

> *"We need to build bridges to the inside, so when they return, they have networks and supports."*

Ex-offenders as peer volunteers

Key informants emphasized the benefits of ex-offenders as volunteers in community-based programs. These include the following:

- Program participants are more comfortable with and open to receiving messages from their peers than from professionals (6).

- Peer volunteers are considered credible sources of information for program clients because they can easily identify with the challenges of reintegrating into the community (6).

- Peer volunteers who have been successful in the community can share valuable lessons and practical insights from their own experience (7).

- Peer volunteers can convey to program participants that they can be successful. In this regard, the peer volunteer illustrates living stories of hope and possibility (5).

- Volunteering gives ex-offenders and offenders the opportunity to experience the rewards of "giving back" to the community (3).

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1 Numbers in parentheses indicate the number of key informants who made that particular comment.

- Professionals can gain new perspectives on the struggles and challenges facing offenders in the community setting if they have opportunities to work alongside peer volunteers (2).

Two key informants noted that ex-offenders have been instrumental in founding and establishing several well-known organizations that offer peer volunteering in community-based rehabilitation. Examples include Delancey Street programs, Alberta Seventh Step Society, LINC (British Columbia), and Pioneer Human Services (Seattle).

> *"They are members of the target population, so they are experts. There is more credibility in the message being heard. For anyone who has been marginalized, being asked to help does a major piece for their self-esteem. They are invaluable in our work."*
>
> *"The best tools they can use are the offenders that turn their life around. We can show them that we changed because we decided to change; nothing special about us."*
>
> *"The audience is more receptive than when professionals talk to them. They can relay a positive message."*

Types of peer-volunteer roles and activities

Key informants reported that ex-offenders are often used to offer peer support and to serve as peer helpers or mentors. More specifically, some key informants (8) noted that ex-offenders who have formed positive community connections and achieved stability in a crime-free and addiction-free lifestyle are linked with program participants who would benefit from the practical experiences, support, and advocacy of a peer volunteer. Peer helping or mentoring includes a wide range of helping activities such as linking clients to essential community services, accompanying clients to appointments, reviewing and teaching basic living routines, and helping clients understand and meet their parole and legal obligations (3). Other peer volunteer activities or roles include:

- participating in community outreach services (1);
- providing services within correctional facilities (3);
- presenting/speaking on relevant topics to community groups or schools (4);
- delivering educational, health, and training sessions for peers (2);
- tutoring or helping with academic upgrading or literacy programs (1);
- carrying out individual support activities for offenders, their family members, and victims (2); and
- helping with an agency's administrative or maintenance tasks (4).

Some organizations have also employed ex-offenders as part of their ongoing service delivery activities, engaging them as peer counsellors, in-reach workers, and employment and lifestyle coaches (4).

Guidelines for selecting and recruiting peer volunteers

Some key informants (3) recommended that volunteers be selected and recruited using processes similar to those used for paid employment. They indicated that volunteers should have no active addiction, be living crime-free, and facing no new charges (5). In addition, some key informants (2) said that a person's motive for volunteering should be carefully considered. One key informant described an organization that had in place a minimum standard policy for selection and recruitment of volunteers. This policy states that ex-offenders must declare their conditions of release when applying to become volunteers and that these conditions must be confirmed by their probation or parole officers.

Another guideline described by nearly half of key informants (9) was a demonstration of stability within the community (i.e., that the individual is removed from the criminal lifestyle and is not a consumer of any agency or community service). The timeframes attached to the notion of "stable community living" varied from one year to five years.

Key informants said that volunteering should be accessible to all ex-offenders and that the most crucial consideration was matching volunteers to appropriate placements. Two approaches to matching were identified. The first and most common (identified by 13 key informants) focused on minimizing the risk of relapse and ensuring the safety of both volunteers and those being served. This can be accomplished by carefully screening individuals and settings to avoid putting ex-offenders in contact with vulnerable populations similar to past victims (e.g., children, youth, women, or seniors) or in settings or circumstances that are similar to those where their

crimes occurred (e.g., having signing authority on bank accounts). The second approach to matching (identified by 3 key informants) involves taking into account the strengths, interests, and preferences of the ex-offender. Ideally, the placement should be one in which the volunteer feels accepted, comfortable, and appreciated. It should also provide the volunteer with a means to use his or her gifts and with opportunities to learn and apply new skills. One key informant noted that individuals who are identified as high-risk for working with others can be given low-risk tasks such as, gardening, harvesting, maintenance, or cleaning that may provide valuable opportunities to learn new skills and to experience a sense of "giving back" or contributing to the community.

Some key informants (4) underscored the responsibility that organizations have to prepare ex-offenders to become volunteers. This includes orientation and training, working alongside or in collaboration with agency staff, regular opportunities for individual debriefing meetings with volunteers, and ongoing supervision and support. Some key informants (5) said that it was important that ex-offenders demonstrate a commitment to their own self-care and to communicating to agency staff when they need additional support.

> *"Act with open eyes."*
>
> *"Treat them naturally, as contributing citizens."*
>
> *"Volunteers who want to help need an attitude of gratitude, that someone has helped them along so they are willing to help someone else along."*

Skill development and training areas

Key informants highlighted a range of topics that could be included as part of volunteer training or orientation. These can be divided into five categories: role definition; integrity and ethics; interpersonal and client coaching skills; relationship building and maintenance skills; and relapse prevention and health management skills.

Role definition (6). This includes:

- volunteer roles and responsibilities; and
- professional, volunteer, and client boundaries.

Integrity and ethics (4). This includes:

- helper ethics including confidentiality, integrity, recognizing limits of competence, and duty to report; and
- legal dispositions/conditions and implications for volunteering.

Interpersonal and client coaching skills (7). This includes:

- effective listening and helping skills;
- group facilitation skills and approaches; and
- presentation and public speaking skills.

Relationship building and maintenance skills (1). This includes:

- conflict resolution; and
- approaches and skills for establishing professional/community partnerships.

Relapse prevention and health management skills (5). This includes:

- mechanisms and procedures for obtaining support; and
- self-care and wellness.

Some key informants (3) noted that ex-offenders often respond well to team-building approaches that build rapport with their coworkers, fellow volunteers, and staff within the agency for which the ex-offenders are volunteering. The presence of agency staff reassures volunteers that they are not alone and that support is available if they need it.

> *"Balance education with experience and the ability to relate."*

Support strategies for peer volunteers

Key informants (4) reported that support strategies, including small-group and individual debriefing sessions, are critical for peer volunteers and help to prevent relapse and helper fatigue. According to some key informants (2), frank dialogue about areas of vulnerability among peer volunteers and staff should be a focus of these sessions. Ideally, small-group support sessions should foster a sense of teamwork and accountability among peer volunteers and program staff (3). Some key informants (2) noted that a specific benefit of these sessions is that they lead to sharing lessons from "real life" experiences.

Key informants (3) indicated that those placing volunteers should be sensitive to their vulnerabilities or triggers. It is also important that a staff person follows up on whether volunteering is causing difficulties for the peer volunteer or is placing them at risk. Individual or group support strategies should also include opportunities to recognize and celebrate the accomplishments of peer volunteers and their clients (3).

> *"Self-care is part and parcel of what we need to do."*
>
> *"There is a need to ensure that the volunteers are involved in something meaningful and there is a satisfaction which becomes contagious. Those who stay say that they have received more than they have given."*

Challenges associated with peer volunteer approaches

Key informants identified several potential challenges that could arise when working with ex-offenders and peer volunteers.

Insufficient preparation

Some agencies may not have adequate volunteer development or readiness programs for ex-offenders (3). Although potential difficulties often surface during the screening process, and agency personnel are usually aware of volunteers' criminal records in advance, some key informants (5) underscored the importance of having well-established training and supervision protocols.

Confidentiality issues

Key informants (2) raised the concern that peer volunteers may have access to personal information about the ex-offenders they are working with in their volunteer capacity. One key informant highlighted the importance of having well-established protocols for managing and sharing information. Others (4) suggested that ethics and the importance of confidentiality be included in volunteer training.

Relapse potential

Key informants (5) noted the potential for peer volunteers to fall back into a criminal lifestyle when they are working with other offenders. Areas of vulnerability could include former patterns of illegal behaviour, addictions, and mental health issues (6). Some key informants (3) noted the importance of ongoing volunteer supervision and support mechanisms as an effective means of responding to potential at-risk situations and behaviours. Key informants (3) also emphasized that agencies should continue to offer support to volunteers even if they become re-involved with the justice system.

Negative associations

Key informants (5) indicated that at-risk situations could develop when ex-offenders with similar criminal backgrounds are placed together. Particular concerns were raised regarding individuals who had previous histories of sexual offences against vulnerable populations (4).

Agency readiness for peer volunteer programs

Key informants described the characteristics of organizations that effectively deliver peer volunteer programs. These include well-established peer recruitment, training, support, and supervision; effective matching protocols; detailed orientation sessions; support and restorative mechanisms; a respectful and strength-based approach for working with ex-offenders; and an openness to volunteer feedback. Here is what key informants said:

- Agencies that engage the services of peer volunteers should be community-based and have established procedures for peer volunteer

recruitment, selection, orientation, training, supervision, and support (5).

- Recruitment and screening should be positive and easy to understand and should seek to match volunteers to placements that will be safe and successful for both volunteers and clients (3).

- Preliminary orientation sessions should provide volunteer applicants with detailed information about the program's peer volunteer philosophy and how it is put into action (2).

- Training programs should not only provide volunteers with the skills and knowledge that they will need for their placement but should also communicate to volunteers that they are valued and capable of making meaningful contributions to others (8).

- Agencies should have mechanisms for offering ongoing support to volunteers either through small-group or individual sessions with peers and program staff (6). Similarly, there should be procedures to support volunteers who may relapse or become re-involved with the criminal justice system (5).

- Agencies should solicit the "voice of the peer volunteers" and ask for their insights when planning and tailoring a peer volunteer program (3).

- Agency policies and procedures should reinforce and build on volunteers' strengths. Ideally, established routines should encourage volunteers to demonstrate responsible caring attitudes towards themselves and others (3).

Key informants noted that program staff might need training before becoming involved in a peer volunteer program. During this training, staff should have opportunity to learn about the challenges facing ex-offenders as they re-enter the community (5).

Evaluation and sustainability

Some key informants (5) underscored the importance of ongoing evaluation and review. One stressed the importance of developing a logical framework for implementing volunteer programs. Others (3) noted the value of established reporting forms that could help in monitoring daily operations and be used for periodic program audits.

Several key informants (9) stressed the importance of evaluating the ongoing operation of the program and its impact on volunteers, clients, and the wider community. Key sources of information for evaluation include program staff and clients, peer volunteers, and community stakeholders directly involved in program referral or in organizational partnerships (3). Key informants suggested that evaluation of peer volunteer programs should include the following:

- attendance and engagement in ongoing operational, service, and support activities (3);
- level of skill and confidence gained through the volunteer experiences (3);
- nature of peer volunteer interactions with staff, community service providers, and clients (5); and
- recognition of specific personal accomplishments or achievements (2).

Key informants (4) noted that volunteer programs should include follow-up or regular meetings with peer volunteers as part of an ongoing evaluation. Meeting regularly with peer volunteers is important because it can provide an opportunity to talk about how their volunteer experience is going, and to provide a means for direct constructive feedback on their work. During the application stage, peer volunteers would have been required to state their personal goals for volunteering, and these meetings can provide an opportunity to monitor their progress towards achieving those goals.

> "It is important to look at the efficacy of ex-offender contribution from their perspective (how it impacted on them) and the agency (how it helped us deliver a message) and the target audience (how having the ex-offender involved affected what they took out of the interaction)."

Focus group findings

Introduction

The purpose of this phase of the research was to gather feedback from ex-offenders who had been involved in community-based rehabilitation programs as clients and volunteers. To do this, we held eight focus groups in four regions of Canada.

Focus group regions and participation

The focus group sessions involved a total of 41 ex-offenders who were either current or former participants in community-based rehabilitation or support programs. The majority were undertaking peer volunteer activities; the remainder were about to do so. Participants were asked for their insights on peer volunteer programs, including the challenges, benefits, training needs, and supports needed to implement these programs successfully. On average, there were six participants per focus group (see Table 4 for a breakdown of participants by region). Sessions varied from one to two hours in length.

Table 4: Geographic locations of focus groups

Geographic Locations	Number of Participants
Eastern Canada	5
Central Canada	10
Prairies	8
Western Canada	18
Total	41

Methodology

Potential focus group locations were identified in consultation with the national John Howard Society network. Additional consultation was done with the Salvation Army network of service providers and Correctional Services Canada. Four sites were identified representing eastern, central, and western Canada, and the prairies. We worked with staff from community-based rehabilitation agencies to identify potential participants for each focus group session.

To assure confidentiality, program staff made initial contacts with potential focus group participants and explained the purpose and specific data-gathering activities of our research. Individuals who expressed an interest in participating in a focus group were subsequently informed of the time when sessions would be held. Sufficient interest was generated to allow us to hold two focus groups in each location.

A semi-structured discussion format was used to facilitate each focus group. Flip charts, descriptive notes, and session summaries provided the basis from which to create a written summary of each focus group. After all eight focus groups were completed, we merged the individual written summaries to create a unified data set. We analyzed these data to identify key themes. We then sorted and organized these themes into meaningful categories.

The findings for this phase of the research are presented below under the following major themes:

- benefits of general volunteering opportunities;
- types of peer volunteer roles and activities;
- guidelines for the selection and recruitment of peer volunteers;
- skill development and training;
- guidelines for supporting peer volunteers; and
- challenges associated with peer volunteer approaches.

Benefits of general volunteering opportunities

Focus groups participants reported that many ex-offenders are not given an opportunity to volunteer, and therefore do not recognize the positive benefits associated with helping others in the community. In some instances, ex-offenders are screened out of volunteering programs before they have an opportunity to discover the relevance of volunteering to the direction their lives are taking. Participants gave a variety of reasons for supporting the use of peer volunteers in community-based rehabilitation programs. The following is a summary of what focus group participants said:

- Peer volunteering allows ex-offenders to feel as if they are part of a community. Many ex-offenders do not have families or friends that they can depend on for support, but they still "need to belong." Volunteering often provides a way for ex-offenders to learn or re-learn how to form relationships in the community. An ex-offender without social contacts may seek out risky situations merely to be among people, to form relationships, and to be accepted.

- Peer volunteering may be one of the only opportunities for an ex-offender to "give back" to the community or to society. Focus group participants noted that volunteering introduces some individuals to the personal rewards and satisfaction that come from helping others and being appreciated. For some individuals who had committed violent crimes, volunteering in a limited capacity afforded their "only way to say sorry."

- Peer volunteers are especially qualified to help offenders adapt to the community because they had "a lived experience" and personal understanding of the difficulties associated with adjusting to a non-custodial environment. Peer volunteers who shared their experiences, mistakes, challenges, and successes were considered valuable sources of information and learning.

- Peer volunteers are regarded as "credible guides or coaches" for ex-offenders because of their practical experiences in navigating the system. This guide or coach relationship is especially valuable in helping ex-offenders gain access to services and develop positive and sustainable community linkages.

- Ex-offenders are comfortable working with peer volunteers. Focus group participants described the quick process of engaging with a peer volunteer and the inherent or immediate trust that helped to motivate them to change. They also said that peer volunteers gave them the sense of being heard and understood by someone who shared a common history of incarceration. They were more at ease receiving a straightforward and frank response from a peer than from a helping professional.

- Peer volunteers provide a sense of hope to ex-offenders that they too "can make it on the outside." The sense that organizations trust an ex-offender to help work with others also conveyed hope to clients that they could also be accepted and involved in meaningful work in the community.

> "Without volunteering, we become an island and withdraw without hope."
>
> "You develop a sense of belonging that allows you to get past feelings of isolation, aloneness, being different."
>
> "I always tell the people I meet, 'I don't know you, but I know where you're coming from.' There is no judgement."

Types of peer volunteer roles and activities

Focus group participants reported that peer volunteers appeared to be involved in a wide range of tasks and responsibilities related to the community-based rehabilitation. Some of the cited volunteer activities included:

- delivering educational sessions or forums in the community;
- facilitating job search activities;
- assisting with employment readiness activities and programs;
- making presentations to community groups;
- peer counselling or mediation;
- leading self-help or support group sessions;
- reaching into correctional sites to organize volunteer opportunities for offenders prior to their release;

- reaching out to ex-offenders in the community who lack positive points of connection;
- accompanying offenders on passes to the community to attend appointments or family visits;
- providing life-style coaching on basic living routines;
- providing liaison between legal and community-based services or agencies;
- acting as advocates for clients and organizing access to community support and/or treatment;
- serving in an advisory capacity on community or agency boards;
- assisting with agency administrative or maintenance work;
- organizing or contributing to community improvement projects (e.g., repairs, building); and
- participating in community service initiatives (e.g., soup kitchens, food-banks, shelters).

Focus group participants underscored the important role of peer volunteers in carrying out in-reach programming to correctional settings. They held the view that these programs should be organized and driven by ex-offender volunteers. They also noted that some agencies depend on in-reach programs to engage volunteers while they are still in custody. As such, in-reach activities were regarded as crucial for promoting the inclusion of ex-offenders as volunteers.

Guidelines for the selection and recruitment of peer volunteers

Focus group participants identified the key criteria that should be considered when recruiting and selecting ex-offenders as peer volunteers. They said that ex-offenders should be required to demonstrate stability in community relationships and routines, have an other-centred motivation, possess interpersonal and practical problem-solving skills, and make a

commitment to be consistent and dependable in collaborative and service roles to others. They also noted that agencies should make a commitment to matching ex-offender volunteers with appropriate placements.

Stability in community relationships and routines

Peer volunteers must demonstrate a period of stability in the community to ensure the safety of volunteers, clients, and the wider community. Focus group participants were reluctant to attach a specific period of time to this requirement; however, they underscored the importance of peer volunteers "living crime-free and charge-free" lifestyles as examples to their clients. In general, participants agreed that peer mentors should have longstanding success in functioning in the community and should not be consumers of the community service for which they volunteer.

An other-centred motivation

Peer volunteers should disclose their motivations for volunteering. Worthy reasons include a genuine desire to give back, a willingness to make a contribution without the expectation of receiving something in return, and a desire to enhance the quality of life of others. Questionable motives included volunteering to boost one's ego or to gain credibility. Peer volunteers should also be committed to such qualities as unconditional acceptance and empathy for others.

Interpersonal skills

Peer volunteers should be comfortable introducing themselves to others. They should be willing to work with peers and staff "inside" the prison system and with community members and service providers on the "outside."

Practical problem-solving skills

Peer volunteers should possess problem-solving skills and have knowledge of community systems and services. This combination of skill and knowledge was viewed as critical for helping clients develop and execute plans to return to the community following a period of incarceration.

Consistency and dependability

To build credibility for the volunteer team or the agency, it is essential for peer volunteers to be consistent, dependable, and true to their word. Peer volunteers should also demonstrate a willingness to be accountable to others for their attitudes and behaviours.

Appropriate matching of volunteers and placements

Agencies should carefully match ex-offender volunteers with volunteering opportunities, taking into account their individual histories, vulnerabilities, and strengths. It is critical that they are not assigned tasks or placed in settings that are similar to or linked with their previous charges or offences and that are in accord with their release stipulations. Ideally, placements should reflect their interests, skill sets, and strengths. Focus group participants advocated a small-step approach in matching clients to specific placements. This would involve ex-offenders undertaking time-limited volunteer tasks that would be comfortable and successful for them.

Focus group participants noted that agencies should be careful to screen out individuals who persist in "glorifying criminal behaviour" by telling stories about their criminal or drug-related pasts. Programs that use peer volunteers should verify that ex-offenders' relationships and circles of influence are positive and that their current associates are not practicing addicts or involved in criminal activities. Focus group participants expressed specific concern about ex-offenders with a history of sex offences being placed together in the same volunteer programs or activities.

> *"They should have good insights as to what led them to offend and also be willing to accept that their role as a volunteer is to be a positive role model for clients with whom they work."*

Skill development and training

Focus group participants underscored the importance of volunteer training for ex-offenders. Initial training should be preceded by an orientation to the volunteer program, including the philosophy of the sponsoring agency, the role of volunteers, and the organization of volunteer placements. They noted that it was crucial to devote adequate time to train peer volunteers and introduce them to their roles and responsibilities in enjoyable and rewarding ways. Training formats should be hands-on, involve demonstrations, and provide individuals with the opportunity to learn and practice essential skills under supervision before applying them independently. Suggested topics for volunteer orientation and training programs included:

Roles and procedures. This includes:
- volunteer roles and responsibilities;
- agency protocols and procedures; and
- administrative and reporting skills.

Basic helper competencies. This includes:

- listening and mentorship skills;
- communication skills;
- suicide prevention; and
- ethics, confidentiality, and information-sharing.

Group facilitation skills. This includes:

- public speaking;
- session leadership skills; and
- teamwork.

Case management skills. This includes:

- case planning skills;
- establishing and maintaining relationships with community service providers;
- making referrals; and
- knowledge of sources of community support.

Personal health and wellness. This includes:

- self-care and relapse prevention;
- developing self-esteem/self-confidence;
- understanding strengths and vulnerabilities;
- stress management/coping skills; and
- accepting and using feedback.

Guidelines for supporting peer volunteers

Focus group participants underscored the importance of establishing specific procedures and mechanisms to ensure sufficient and ongoing support for volunteers. Some of the suggestions included being patient, helping with time management, informing volunteers of existing sources of support, providing group support and individual supervision, having procedures for dealing with relapse, and reinforcing a sense of team spirit among program staff and volunteers. Here is a summary of what focus group participants said:

- **Patience:** Program staff should be patient with peer volunteers. At the outset, ex-offenders may not be aware of specific agency expectations and therefore may need prompts or gentle reminders to complete expected routines or tasks.

- **Time management:** Ex-offenders may need help organizing their time. In some instances, it may be better for them to volunteer for only a few hours per week with the intent of sustaining that commitment over a longer term.

- **Support:** Volunteers need to be informed how and where they can get immediate support when they have specific concerns or are feeling vulnerable.

- **Group support:** Group support from other peer volunteers provides a safe environment for volunteers to share openly and learn from others' mistakes.

- **Individual supervision:** Regular feedback and assessment from program staff and supervisors can help to address concerns or issues related to the volunteer experience or placement. This also serves to encourage volunteers and provides a means to discuss and celebrate accomplishments and personal progress.

- **Dealing with relapse:** Agencies must have established procedures to deal with difficulties such as relapse into addiction or resumption of criminal activity. This should be done in a safe environment in which concerns and mistakes can be shared and worked through, and issues can be resolved.

- **Team building:** Peer volunteers should be fully acknowledged as "members of the team." Socializing and fun times provide a sense of belonging and opportunities to strengthen relationships and to celebrate successful volunteer activities.

Challenges associated with peer volunteer approaches

Focus group participants identified several areas of concern and potential challenges associated with ex-offenders as peer volunteers.

Recognizing misplaced motivations

In some instances, ex-offenders may engage in volunteering for reasons that are not genuine or positive. For example, individuals may try to use their volunteer positions as a means of obtaining "signs of appreciation" or favours from others. Focus group participants noted the need to use orientation and training sessions to screen the motivations of volunteers, and to emphasize the importance of volunteer responsibilities and commitments.

Coping with withdrawn support

In a few instances, institutions or community partners have ceased to work with, or have limited the volunteer role of ex-offenders without giving them a reason. Organizations need to be transparent (about reasons for changing their commitment) with ex-offenders, and also try to keep their commitments. In other words, organizations should act towards ex-offenders as they expect ex-offenders to act towards them.

Struggling with past identities and transference

Ex-offenders' histories can be a major challenge. Focus group participants noted that, as prisoners, they had fought against the "system" with which they were now working. Some ex-offenders have emotional triggers to identities and personas that would potentially undermine successful functioning in the community. Focus group participants emphasized that peer volunteers must know their personal and professional boundaries and communicate them to others. Peer volunteers must be assertive about their professional boundaries and take responsibility to ensure that their relationships are professional with regard to self-disclosure, giving or receiving gifts, conflict of interest (where the peer volunteer is working with a client population that they are affiliated with), maintaining established work conventions such as meeting during business hours, in a professional setting, not alone, etc. Volunteers who do not have well-defined boundaries are at-risk of "living their work," "re-living their experiences," and taking on others' troubles.

Shifting from client to peer volunteer

It is often difficult for peer volunteers to interact with prison staff who are familiar to them from their experience as a prisoner. Some focus group participants who had experience as in-reach volunteers said that they did not feel accepted, or that they were being "given a chance" by prison staff. Similarly, if volunteers had been clients of an agency's services, they might find it difficult to make the transition to being a peer volunteer with the same agency. Focus group participants recommended that program staff make efforts to elicit feedback from peer volunteers and to respect their insights when planning activities.

Accepting affirmation

Ex-offenders are often not used to positive feedback and may feel anxious because they do not know how to respond to it. Ex-offenders may also fear that their successes will be overshadowed if people become aware of their pasts.

Regrouping following relapse

It is important to support ex-offenders if they relapse or fail in their attempts to adapt to community life. However, such support should have clear parameters and must not place others at risk.

Common themes and practices

The conceptualization of promising practices relating to program delivery in health, education, and community sectors has been approached with varying degrees of rigour (Association of Ontario Health Centres (AOHC), 1999; Health Canada, 2002). Recent approaches to promising practices have emphasized the importance of analyzing both evidence-based insights from published literature and lessons learned from practitioners, policy makers, and clients. The results of such analyses have been used to formulate guidelines for program managers and practitioners who are involved in designing and implementing community-based service delivery systems (AOHC, 1999; Murnaghan, 2006).

For the purposes of our research, "service delivery themes and promising practices" are defined as emerging guidelines gleaned from published literature, service providers, and clients of community-based rehabilitation programs. The themes and practices presented in this section of the report reflect findings that were raised in at least two of our three data collection efforts: literature review, key informant interviews, and focus groups. We have grouped these findings under the following headings:

1. Barriers to the participation of ex-offenders as volunteers
2. Benefits of ex-offenders as peer volunteers
3. Types of peer volunteer activities
4. Selection and recruitment of peer volunteers
5. Structured and supportive recruitment processes
6. Matching peer volunteers with placements
7. Format and delivery of peer volunteer training
8. Skill development training
9. Support strategies for peer volunteers
10. Evaluation considerations

1. Barriers to the participation of ex-offenders as volunteers

- Inclusiveness has become a key issue in volunteering in recent years. Although different kinds of people volunteer, individuals who have participated in community-based rehabilitation programs or made transitions from justice or secure custodial settings are often under-represented in formal volunteering programs.

- Ex-offenders may lack formal volunteer experience and, as a result, may not think that volunteering is relevant to their present lives.

- Barriers to volunteering include having to make a commitment to regular "regimented" volunteer activities and a lack of confidence in new environments and relationships.

- Some agencies and program staff may not welcome ex-offenders' involvement in volunteering because of their past conflict with the law.

- Lengthy recruitment and selection procedures and the potential out-of-pocket costs associated with volunteering (e.g., the cost of transportation) may serve as barriers to volunteering for ex-offenders.

2. Benefits of ex-offenders as peer volunteers

Peer volunteering provides positive and credible role models for clients.

- Volunteering gives ex-offenders the opportunity to be positive role models for their peers and the potential to demonstrate to others that "lives can be turned around" in the community.

- Program participants often view peer volunteers as credible and trustworthy because, as ex-offenders, they have experiences or circumstances in common.

- Program participants may be more open to and comfortable with receiving messages from peer volunteers rather than from professionals.

Peer volunteers support clients' moves toward change.

- The use of peer volunteers encourages program participants to be honest and to take responsibility for their actions.

- Peer volunteers may play an important role in helping others disengage from relationships or circumstances that are detrimental to rehabilitation in a community setting.

Peer volunteering helps to develop community connectedness.

- Peer volunteers have a "lived experience" and personal understanding of the difficulties associated with adjusting to non-custodial environments.

- Peer volunteers can share valuable lessons and practical insights from their own experiences.

- Peer volunteers can help clients learn or relearn how to form relationships in the community.

- Peer volunteers can serve as effective guides/coaches for ex-offenders because of their practical experiences in "navigating the system."

- Peer volunteers can help ex-offenders gain access to services and develop positive and sustainable community linkages.

Peer volunteering has reciprocal benefits for volunteers and program staff.

- Volunteering provides peer volunteers with a sense of empowerment and fulfilment that they may have sought unsuccessfully through their former lifestyle behaviours and choices.

- Peer volunteering involves "caring for and feeling cared about." This fosters a sense of acceptance and belonging for both the volunteer and recipient.

- Volunteering provides ex-offenders and offenders with the opportunity to contribute and experience the rewards of "giving back" to the community.

- Peer volunteering may be one of the only opportunities for an ex-offender to "give back" to the community or to society. For some individuals, volunteering may provide an introduction to the personal rewards and satisfaction that come from helping others and being appreciated.

- Professionals can gain new perspectives on the struggles and challenges facing offenders in the community setting when they work alongside peer volunteers.

3. Types of peer volunteer activities

- **Administrative support roles:** Former program participants may be given the opportunity to help with administrative or operational aspects of the organization. This could include providing reception services such as meeting people and answering phones, or carrying out administrative tasks such as copying, filing, or organizing material.

- **Outreach/in-reach services:** Peer outreach involves members of a peer group or social network reaching out to others to provide education or other forms of support. Outreach programs focus on community-based rehabilitation efforts whereas in-reach programs provide support to individuals in custodial settings as they prepare to re-enter the community.

- **Support group services:** Community-based support programs help participants as they reintegrate into the community from custodial settings. Within such groups, peer volunteers, program participants, and program staff meet to provide support, share areas of struggle and challenge, and celebrate the accomplishments of program participants.

- **Peer mentoring:** Peer mentoring includes a wide range of helping activities such as linking clients to essential community services, accompanying clients to appointments, reviewing and teaching basic living routines, and helping clients understand and meet their parole and legal obligations.

- **Peer-led workshops and educational sessions:** Peers may also play an active role in sharing educational information or delivering instructional workshops. Educational content may include a wide range of topics such as problem-solving skills, building self-esteem, career exploration/readiness, health issues/self-care, and interpersonal and communication skills.

- **Community improvement activities:** Some peer volunteer programs include participation in community projects that improve the social condition of clients or other community members. Activities may include building projects, home repair activities, helping with yard work, or providing basic services to those in need (e.g., at a soup kitchen or homeless shelter etc.).

- **Presentations to community groups:** Peer volunteers may also serve as speakers for community groups on a wide range of different issues, including substance and alcohol abuse, consequences of being in conflict with the law, and treatment and recovery.

4. Selection and recruitment of peer volunteers

The following are essential components of peer volunteer recruitment and selection.

- **Evaluate peer volunteers' stability in the community:** Ex-offenders should demonstrate a period of stability in the community before they become peer volunteers. This includes living a crime-free and charge-free lifestyle, demonstrating success in living and working within a community, having peer associates who are not practicing addicts or involved in criminal activity, and not being a consumer of the community service for which they are volunteering.

- **Ensure other-centred motivation:** Worthy reasons to volunteer include a genuine desire to give back, a willingness to make a contribution without the expectation of receiving something in return, a desire to enhance the quality of life of others, and a commitment to unconditional acceptance and empathy for others. Questionable motives include volunteering to boost one's ego, to gain credibility, or to glorify criminal behaviour through telling stories about past illegal or harmful events.

- **Assess interpersonal skills:** Peer volunteers should be comfortable introducing themselves to others. They should be willing to work with peers and staff "inside" the prison system, as well as with community members and service providers on the "outside."

- **Evaluate problem-solving abilities:** Peer volunteers should possess problem-solving skills and have knowledge of community systems and services. This combination of skill and knowledge is critical for helping clients develop and execute plans to return to the community following a period of incarceration.

5. Structured and supportive recruitment processes

- **Organize a preliminary orientation session:** Applicants should be given an initial orientation session that introduces them to the volunteer program, its rationale and description, and to the processes involved in becoming a peer volunteer.

- **Hold in-person conversations/meetings:** The recruitment process should be "user-friendly," and should emphasize personal contact through informal conversation and in-person interviews rather than filling out forms. Interviews should explore a range of areas related to the applicant's readiness for a structured volunteer opportunity.

- **Carry out criminal checks and ask for personal disclosure:** Criminal checks should be done with all volunteers to ensure that neither they nor program participants are put in positions of risk. Ex-offenders should be asked to disclose anything that may be relevant to their role as peer volunteers.

- **Follow up with references:** Additional information can be gathered from the references provided by the volunteer. Discrepancies between what the applicant says and what the references say should be clarified before any decision is made about the volunteer's application.

6. Matching peer volunteers with placements

- **Assess vulnerabilities:** Ex-offenders should be carefully matched with volunteering opportunities that take into account their individual histories, vulnerabilities, and strengths. It is critical to avoid tasks and settings that are similar to or linked with previous charges or offences. Ex-offenders should not be placed in sites that include vulnerable populations similar to past victims (e.g., children, youth, women, or seniors) or in settings or circumstances similar to those where their crimes occurred.

- **Integrate strengths and interests:** Placements should reflect the interests, skill sets, and strengths of the volunteer. Ideally, the placement should be one in which the volunteer feels accepted, comfortable, and appreciated. Placements should provide a way for volunteers to use their gifts, to learn and apply new skills.

- **Assign low-risk tasks:** Ex-offenders who are identified as high-risk for working with others can be given low-risk tasks such as gardening, harvesting, maintenance, or cleaning that can provide valuable learning opportunities, help develop new skills, and give these volunteers a sense of "giving back" or contributing to the community.

- **Plan small steps:** Preliminary participation in peer volunteer activities should involve time-limited tasks that are comfortable for the volunteer and at which the volunteer has a good chance for success.

7. Format and delivery of peer volunteer training

- **Organize multiple time-limited sessions:** Training programs should be in the form of a series time-limited, workshop-style sessions.

- **Facilitate and guide learning:** The trainer should guide and facilitate volunteer learning so that participants have an accurate understanding of key training concepts and skills.

- **Use an interactive instructional style:** Instead of a lecture-type approach, training sessions should include demonstrations, discussions with participants, role-playing, and skill-building exercises.

- **Emphasize a strength-based perspective:** Training policies and procedures should emphasize building on an individual's skills and capacities.

- **Recognize accomplishments:** Use incentives and recognition (e.g., certificates of workshop completion) to encourage volunteers to complete the training program.

- **Equip program personnel:** Program staff may need training before becoming involved in a peer volunteer program. This training should aim to make staff sensitive to the specific challenges facing ex-offenders as they re-enter the community setting.

8. Skill development training areas

The following themes that could be included in a peer. volunteer training or orientation program.

- **Role definition and ethics:** This could include volunteer roles and responsibilities; help on ethics including confidentiality, integrity, recognizing limits of competence, and duty to report; legal dispositions/conditions and their implications for volunteering; and professional, volunteer, and client boundaries.

- **Organizational skills:** This could include goal setting and prioritization, and record keeping and reporting.

- **Client coaching skills:** This could include effective listening and helping skills; motivational interviewing; approaches to problem-solving; preparing referrals and making connections with services; and program and community-based protocols.

- **Peer education competencies:** This could include group facilitation, presentation, and public speaking skills.

- **Relationship building and maintenance skills:** This could include team work, conflict resolution, and skills for establishing professional and community partnerships.

- **Relapse prevention and health management skills:** This could include mechanisms and procedures for obtaining support; managing criticism; self-esteem/self-worth; and self-care, wellness, and coping.

9. Support strategies for peer volunteers

- **Organize small-group and individual debriefing sessions:** Support strategies, such as small group and individual debriefing services, are critical to the effective development of peer volunteers and can help prevent relapse.

- **Ensure open dialogue:** Support meetings should include frank dialogue about areas of vulnerability, lessons learned from "real life" experiences, and accountability among peer volunteers and staff.

- **Do regular reviews of peer volunteers:** Program coordinators should do regular follow-up reviews with volunteers to assess current volunteer activities and outcomes, to address areas of concern, and to celebrate the accomplishments of peer volunteers and their clients.

- **Provide ongoing supervision and consultation:** Organizations should have established mechanisms for ongoing supervision and support of peer volunteers. Supervisors should try to make peer volunteers comfortable, and should encourage them to share their concerns and ask for help when they need it.

- **Create mechanisms for peer volunteer feedback:** Organizations should solicit the "voices of the peer volunteers" and apply their insights when planning and tailoring peer volunteer programs and addressing client needs.

- **Establish restorative processes:** Agencies should continue to offer support to volunteers even if they become re-involved with the justice system. They should have procedures in place to support the restoration of these volunteers.

- **Organize team-building events:** Volunteers may benefit from team-building activities and social events that strengthen rapport, and extend support among peers and agency staff.

10. Evaluation considerations

- **Develop a framework for project implementation and evaluation:** This is essential for identifying the major objectives of a peer volunteer program and the actions needed to achieve them. The framework should include objectives, inputs, and resources; outputs and activities; and likely short-term and long-term outcomes. The framework should also have a built-in cycle of monitoring, evaluation, reflection, and learning to judge how well activities are enabling accomplishment of the short- and long-term program objectives.

- **Monitor program activities:** Program monitoring provides information on the daily operations of the peer volunteer program. Monitoring can be done using daily activity records that document the location, duration, and type of peer volunteer support provided and the extent to which the service was helpful to clients.

- **Do follow-up evaluations:** Two types of follow-up evaluation can be used: process evaluation and outcome evaluation. Process evaluation focuses on how effectively the peer volunteer program is implemented and to what extent it reflects the actual assumptions, objectives, and activities of the original program design. Outcome evaluation investigates the impact of the program on the client and peer volunteers.

Final reflections

The purpose of this project was to identify promising practices related to recruiting and placing ex-offenders as peer volunteers in community-based rehabilitation programs. We did this through a review of relevant literature, key informant interviews, and focus groups.

The literature contained information on the benefits of engaging ex-offenders as peer volunteers and suggested methods for structuring peer volunteer programs. However, we did not find much information or research on the effectiveness of the proposed program models or the peer volunteer approach. Several sources identified the need for further research on the impact and rehabilitation value of peer volunteer initiatives for ex-offenders in community-based programs.

The key informant interviews with service providers and focus groups with ex-offenders provided us with practical lessons learned from direct experience in community-based volunteer programs. They also provided detailed information related to the rationale for peer volunteer programs and their organization and implementation. They provided support for the benefits of peer volunteer programs, but underscored that opportunities for ex-offenders to participate in these initiatives are limited. Key informants and focus group participants reported that efforts should be made to extend the capacity of community-based rehabilitation programs to undertake or develop peer volunteer activities.

The findings from this research provided a range of possible suggestions, lessons, and key actions that could help in the development and implementation of peer volunteer programs in community-based rehabilitation program for ex-offenders. Further research on this subject on this subject could deepen understanding of these practices and add additional insights.

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