

Ex-offenders as Peer Volunteers

John Howard Society of Greater Moncton and the University of New Brunswick

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.¹ This fact sheet reports some of the findings of that research.

Ex-offenders are encouraged to volunteer as part of their reintegration into the community but often face significant barriers because of their criminal backgrounds. Many ex-offenders report that they:

- feel that their criminal record will immediately “screen them out”;
- are unwilling or unable to commit to structured volunteer activities;
- believe that their past will make them unwelcome as volunteers; and
- are not aware of volunteer opportunities and that no one has asked them to volunteer.

Many theorists have stressed the potential therapeutic benefits of ex-offenders participating in peer volunteering activities:

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

“You develop a sense of belonging that allows you to get past feelings of isolation, aloneness, being different.”

- Peer volunteering provides a forum for peer volunteers to learn and practice new skills in a “safe” environment.
- Peer volunteering can provide a sense of empowerment and fulfillment that ex-offenders may previously have sought in criminal lifestyles and ineffective relationships.
- Peer volunteers are viewed as credible and trustworthy by participants in community-based rehabilitation programs because they have shared experiences or circumstances that are similar to those of program participants.
- Peer volunteers can play an important role in helping others through the rehabilitation or reintegration process.

Organizations that are interested in setting up a peer volunteer program should consider the following:

1. **Select and recruit** the right volunteer for the job. Know the criminal history of ex-offenders who participate in the program so that you do not place them in situations that would be unsafe or unhealthy for them or for program recipients. Get references from parole or probation officers and discuss peer volunteer responsibilities with them. Take ex-offenders’ likes, dislikes, skills, and competencies into consideration when matching them to a position. Emphasize that the volunteer effort should focus on helping program participants, not peer volunteers. Select ex-offenders who are able to interact comfortably with other people “inside” the prison system and with service providers on the “outside.”

1. The full report on this project, *Ex-Offenders as Peer Volunteers in Community Rehabilitation*, can be found on the Knowledge Development Centre website, www.kdc-cdc.ca

2. Training and supervision are critical to the success of peer volunteers. Provide a thorough orientation to the agency, to the volunteer program, and to volunteer roles and responsibilities. Provide ample opportunity to ask questions. Training should include demonstrations and should give participants a chance to learn and practice essential skills under supervision before they apply them independently. Include a session on self-care and relapse prevention. And remember, depending on the amount of time ex-offenders have spent in prison, they may need help with day-to-day basics such as how to use a fax machine, how the bus system works, how to use a bank card, and community “systems” and “norms.”

3. Monitoring and evaluation will help peer volunteers to thrive. This should include help with time management, immediate and accessible support in dealing with crisis situations and personal vulnerabilities related to community reintegration. Regular feedback and assessment from program staff and supervisors, acknowledgment that the peer volunteer is “one of the team,” and patience are also important. Have a restorative process in place in case difficulties arise (e.g., relapse to addiction or criminal activity). This should allow the ex-offender to deal with the problem in a straightforward manner and in a safe environment.

“After awhile of doing prison visits as a volunteer, I found myself thinking and talking just like I did when I was in prison. It was such a relief that my supervisor understood.”

What peer volunteers can do that others can't do:

- Peer volunteers provide a “living example” of hope and possibility for change to other ex-offenders.
- Ex-offenders view peer volunteers as “credible guides or coaches for navigating the system” because they have been through the same process that the ex-offenders are going through.
- Ex-offenders have an almost immediate sense of trust in peer volunteers that helps motivate them to change.

“I always tell the people I meet, ‘I don't know you, but I know where you're coming from.’ There is no judgement.”

Organizations that seek to recruit peer volunteers should look for:

- a demonstrated stability in community relationships and routines,
- a desire to volunteer in order to help others, not to help one's self,
- interpersonal and practical problem-solving skills, and
- the ability to commit to being consistent and dependable and to work collaboratively.

Peer volunteering helps ex-offenders, program recipients, and nonprofit and voluntary organizations. It gives ex-offenders a sense of purpose and a place to become a full citizen. It allows program participants to be coached by someone who truly understands their situation, can provide an opportunity for immediate trust, and can begin the process of change much more quickly. It gives organizations a better chance for success with their community-based rehabilitation programs.

“Without volunteering we become an island and withdraw without hope.”