

# Benefits of Peer Volunteering

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.<sup>1</sup> This fact sheet reports some of the benefits of peer volunteering.

Volunteering is a form of “active citizenship” in which the volunteer extends valuable services to other members of their community. In this sense, “Prison gates need not be barriers to good citizenship...” (Ole Ingstrup, Commissioner, Correctional Service of Canada, 1999)

## **The John Howard Society research included focus groups with 40 ex-offenders across Canada who were fully engaged as peer volunteers. Here’s what they said about their experiences:**

- Peer volunteering allows ex-offenders to feel part of a community.
- Peer volunteering often provides a way to learn or re-learn how to form relationships in the community.
- Peer volunteering may be one of the only opportunities for ex-offenders to “give back” and the “only way to say sorry” to the community.
- Peer volunteers provide a sense of hope to other ex-offenders that they, too, “can make it on the outside.”
- The experiences of peer volunteers give other ex-offenders hope that they could also be accepted and involved in meaningful work in the community.

## **Peer volunteers are involved in a wide range of activities, including:**

- delivering educational sessions or speaking at forums in the community;
- helping ex-offenders with job searches;
- helping 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 facilities to organize volunteer opportunities for offenders prior to their release;
- accompanying offenders on passes to the community to attend appointments or family visits;
- acting as life-skills coaches and teaching basic living routines;
- acting as liaison between legal and community-based services or agencies;
- acting as advocates for clients and organizing needed community support or treatment;
- serving on boards of directors or community advisory committees;
- helping community-based organizations with administrative or maintenance work;
- organizing or contributing to community improvement projects (repairs, building, etc.); and
- helping at soup kitchens, food banks, shelters, etc.

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](http://www.kdc-cdc.ca)

**Based on our research, we offer the following advice to ex-offenders who may be interested in becoming peer volunteers:**

- It may be difficult to make the shift from “inmate” or “client” to peer volunteer. Some staff may need some time to feel completely comfortable with relating to you in this new role. You may find that in some situations you may revert back to a client-professional relationship as opposed to the new employer-volunteer relationship. Remind yourself that this may take time to work through before staff are completely accepting of you as a peer volunteer, and you are able to think of yourself as a member of the staff or volunteer team in this new role.
- View your peer volunteer opportunity as a way to not only use your life experiences, skills, and strengths and also to learn and apply new skills. Be prepared to participate in any training or workshops that are offered to you.
- As a peer volunteer, be aware that there will most likely be situations (e.g., sights, sounds, smells) that may trigger emotional responses because of your life experiences. This is normal. It can help to talk to a supervisor or another volunteer about what you are feeling.
- Because you will be volunteering with a group of people that you have some affiliation with, your peers, it is important for you to know your personal boundaries and communicate them to your peers.

**The research included interviews with over 20 key informants who represented a wide range of public, nonprofit, and volunteer organizations involved in community-based services for ex-offenders. Here is some of what they said:**

- Peer volunteering gives ex-offenders an opportunity to interact and build positive relationships with people on the “outside” in a setting that has an understanding of their criminal history and of the issues involved in their reintegration and rehabilitation into society.
- Peer volunteering, and working alongside the other staff in a community justice setting helps ex-offenders to relearn or reinforce pro-social attitudes and behaviours that are critical to their success in the community.
- Program staff and agency professionals gain new and valuable perspectives about the struggles and challenges facing offenders in the community when they work alongside and journey with ex-offender volunteer.