

Peer Support Model

the challenge of engaging women ex-offenders to support their peers in accessing employment, training and education

This leaflet offers a model for enabling agencies to employ peers to work successfully with women in trouble with the criminal justice system. It is aimed at organisations who are about to deliver or are delivering prison or community-based programmes for women offenders. It offers advice and guidance on developing a model of practice which will ensure the peers are probably recruited and inducted, that relationships with external staff is working effectively and that the experience empowers women to help their peers. It draws on the extensive experience of the SOVA led project 'Women into Work' including 5 Pilot Projects which trialled the use of peer supporters in their work. This work concluded that women ex-offenders should be employed to facilitate the resettlement of other women offenders as a core feature of provision in the criminal justice system

The model is constructed around 3 key stages, although attention to each stage will overlap with the others.

Stage One: Defining the concept

- What is a peer?
 - The nature of the peer will change according to the service user you are working with
- Why should peers work well with offenders?
 - They empower
 - They innovate
 - There is ease of communication
 - There is empathy
- What defines peer work
 - It is a 'Bottom-up' approach to practice
- Will it inform other areas of practice
 - Our work has been in the criminal justice system but the concept is transferable to any disadvantaged group

Stage Two: Setting up peer support

- Recognise peer support work is about employing ex-offenders going beyond developmental opportunities whilst serving a prison sentence i.e. listening schemes though this may be a stepping stone for some
- Readiness of individual women to take on role and re-enter prison must be carefully assessed
- Guard against assuming that a shared experience of custody will automatically ensure a sensitive response when working with their peers, some people as in any job will be unsuitable
- Must be part of a holistic support package with good communications between case managers, treatment and support

Stage Three: Delivery

This includes:

• Recruitment and induction

• Support and Management

• Provision of Diverse services

• Learning from the experience

• Mainstreaming practices

Recruitment and Selection

- Convincing prospective applicants that having a record might be an advantage not a disadvantage
- Recognise shift in identity needs support
- Recognise need for skills development through training needs analysis
- Plan the transition from custody to a 'professional' role
- Need for proper induction within the prison setting
- Continuity of personnel in prison to ensure entry protocols like security and access sensitivity handled
- Ensure knowledge of prison processes and protocols

Support and Management

- Recognising the support needs of peer support workers can be different and more challenging than traditional supervision with trained staff
- Transition in role
- Lack of formal skills training
- Anxiety in new identity
- Develop an all-encompassing support package
- Support issues when working with groups
- Develop an empowering approach to management
- Facilitate informal support networks
- Value of two-way learning

Recruitment and Selection

- One-to-one tailoring approach needed – 'stepping stones'
- Diverse roles including
 - Counsellor, Personal Assistant, Dietician, Drug Worker, Role Model, Fashion Advisor, Job Advisor, Friend, Fitness Advisor, Benefits Advisor, Mother, Diplomatic middle (wo)man (i.e. when dealing with families), Make up and hair advisor, Health Advisor, Mother figure, stood up date, Health and Safety Officer (clean needles)
- Close relationships v professional distance
- Job as a 'vocation'
- Training support vital to develop skills

Learning from the experience

- Maintaining emotional boundaries
- When employing women (ex)offenders, particularly those who may have a history of drugs misuse it is vital that the impact of unexpected events in the worklife be recognised and addressed
- Increased rapport, openness and interpersonal connections with beneficiaries from peer support
- positive role models and inspiration for beneficiaries
- 'being heard' vital for beneficiaries
- Being realistic

Mainstreaming Practices

- Ensure policy makers and senior managers engage with the concept
- Use statutory mechanisms such as circulars and other policy tools to embed a supportive policy
- HR materials for recruiting safely should be produced that provide guidance to employers on developing the policies and procedures to actively recruit ex-offenders as workers
- Relationships with statutory provision needs careful placement
- Officers on the ground need to develop positive engagement with the concept