

Jewish Seniors Alliance: Peer Counselling Program

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LOCATION

Vancouver

TYPE OF PROGRAM

Social Connectedness

Wellness & Mental Health

LINK

<https://jsalliance.org/peer-support-2/counselling/>

The Jewish Seniors Alliance (JSA)'s Peer Counselling Program works with seniors in need of emotional support, who may be experiencing social isolation, grief, health-related issues, and/or other challenges. The program is open to all seniors and is offered in multiple languages. The JSA is one of 13 organizations offering peer counselling based on the model developed by the Seniors Peer Counselling of BC (SPC/BC).

The Peer Counselling Program is just one of several Peer Support Services offered by the Jewish Seniors Alliance to seniors in the Vancouver area – they also offer friendly visiting, friendly phone calls, and information and referral services. Two part-time staff (a Trainer/Supervisor and Coordinator) coordinate all of JSA's Peer Support Services, but the programs primarily rely on volunteers to deliver the services. Funding for the Services comes from the Jewish Federation of Greater Vancouver, City of Vancouver, provincial Community Gaming Grants, and private donors.

Participants in the Peer Counselling Program are matched with a peer counsellor and usually meet with them once a week for up to 6 months, though some participants require more frequent meetings and/or a longer period of support. Peer counsellors work with the participant to identify issues in their lives and potential solutions, connect the participant to resources, and reduce social isolation and loneliness. The Trainer/Supervisor connects monthly with participants to check in on their progress and make sure the peer counselling arrangement is working

for them. Peer counselling sessions are usually provided in the participant's home, but may be provided in any location where the participant feels comfortable. Most peer counsellors work with one to three different participants at a time.

In order to work with the Program, interested volunteers complete a criminal record check, interview, and reference checks. Once accepted, they participate in 55 hours (11 sessions) of comprehensive training. The training program is offered only once per year and includes topics such as communication, elder abuse, stress management, empathy, problem solving models, depression and loneliness, ethics/values, and boundary setting. Written evaluations of the training are collected from the volunteers after each training cycle and the feedback is used to improve the training program and materials for future years. After completing the training, the new peer counsellors receive a certificate and attend a graduation ceremony to recognize their achievement. Peer counsellors receive ongoing support through educational meetings held every two months and through individual connection with the Trainer/Supervisor. Volunteers requiring additional support may receive one-on-one coaching or can volunteer in the friendly visiting program to gain additional experience.

Impact - Currently, Peer Support Services has about 60 volunteers and 80 participants (sometimes there is waitlist for services). The Peer Counselling Program aims to empower both the participants and the peer counsellors, and provides opportunities to both groups for socialization, personal growth, and connection to the community. Participants receive emotional support, assistance with problem-solving, and are connected to community resources through the peer counselling program. Participants can sometimes transition between different Peer Support Services offered by the JSA (e.g., after peer counselling may be enrolled in the friendly visiting program) and some participants go on to become peer counsellors themselves.

Strengths and Challenges - As a member of SPC/BC, the Jewish Seniors Alliance was able to implement an already proven model of peer counselling. SPC/BC is a provincial non-profit peer counselling organization and provides opportunities for leveraging resources, sharing information, and collaboration among members. However, since the mid-2000s, SPC/BC has had limited capacity to fulfill its intended role as a

provincial peer counselling organization due to funding cuts. If SPC/BC were to regain their funding, they would be able to better provide support to senior peer counselling programs across the province, including the one offered by the JSA.

Based on the SPC/BC model, the Jewish Seniors Alliance's Peer Counselling Program has a rigorous intake and training program for peer counsellors to ensure new volunteers are well equipped for their roles, and that ongoing support is provided after completion of the program. Offering an extensive training program takes time and resources though, and as a result, the Program is currently only able to offer one training intake a year. The strong volunteer component of this program makes volunteer recruitment and retention vital to its success. Peer counsellors are asked to commit to at least one year of service after their training, and the program attempts to create cohesion and engagement among peer counsellors through group events and regular contact.

An important strength of the Peer Counselling Program is the emphasis it places on empowering both the peer counsellors and participants. Peer counsellors work with the participants to help them to explore and find their own solutions to their problems. For peer counsellors, volunteering gives them a chance to connect and support others, leaving them with a rewarding experience that has a positive impact on their own lives. In order to overcome the transportation barriers facing many isolated and/or vulnerable seniors, the Peer Counselling Program offers one-on-one support in people's homes and provides services for seniors living in assisted living and residential care.