

Project CARE Case Study: Empowering Survivors of Violence through Peer Supports



CASE STUDY PROJECT CARE

About Project Care (Collaboration, Accessibility, Response, Education)

Project CARE provides services to individuals with disabilities who are affected by or at risk for domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence, or stalking in the greater Cincinnati area. The program relies heavily on the use of self-advocates—or peers who have shared experiences—to help guide participants through a process of learning and empowerment to heal and thrive. Project CARE creates an environment for people to safely express themselves and a culture of equality among all people involved in its work – including survivors and self-advocates - to foster empowerment among survivors.

Building on research showing that people with disabilities tend to experience violence at higher rates and for longer periods of time than people without disabilities,¹ Project CARE provides a safe place to build healthy relationships and social capital. Project CARE provides risk reduction classes for healthy and safe relationships, peer support groups, community-based art healing programs, self-advocacy programs, safety training, training to community agencies, outreach, and intervention services.

Program Overview

With a focus on self-advocacy, Project CARE tailors its programs to meet the unique needs of individual participants to help them recognize and break the cycle of domestic violence. Peer support members, or self-advocates as Project CARE calls them, are a small team of 10 to 15 people—both paid staff and volunteers—who have experienced a disability and are also survivors of domestic violence. Many self-advocates have experience as participants in Project CARE, but it is not a requirement. The main requirement to become a peer support member is to have lived experience as a survivor. Project CARE trains peer support members to build skill sets in support of the program's work and facilitates online trainings offered by outside organizations like the Ohio Domestic Violence Network and GLSEN. The peer support team shapes and leads the content of Project CARE's support groups, educational classes, and art-based initiatives. Peer support members' work emphasizes equality, visibility, and respect for survivors with disabilities. Throughout Project CARE's

programming, peer support members teach others how to advocate for their own rights to help “decrease the discrimination and dehumanizing effects that people with disabilities often experience.”² Educational sessions and art-related workshops enable participants and peer support members to develop deep bonds of friendship with peers. Activities and sessions are regularly scheduled. Participants and peer support members can attend as long as they wish and are able.

Elements of Peer Support

Bonding social capital, or connections among peers with similar experiences, is an important aspect of social capital that can help individuals work through challenges together. Project CARE’s peer support efforts include a series of classes that bring people together and are driven by two main factors—interpersonal relationships and self-advocacy. First, Project CARE provides spaces for participants to develop interpersonal peer relationships which are cultivated during classes and support groups. Over time these relationships create authentic friendships and a social capital network of support that is independent of paid caregivers—it consists of “[peers] who are not paid to be in their lives,” as an interviewee explained. A key aspect to fostering a strong culture of equality among these relationships is self-advocacy. Second, to help participants become their own self-advocates, Project CARE empowers participants with knowledge about their rights and provides opportunities for people to safely express themselves, make their own decisions, and lead classes. These two elements of interpersonal relationships and self-advocacy shape Project CARE’s peer support and social capital efforts.

Participant Safety and Confidentiality. Staff relay that creating safe places for people to interact is one of the key ingredients to successful peer supports for survivors because participants can be more open to learning, finding their voice through creative outlets, and cultivating an empowerment mindset without fear. Safety in the program includes a harm free and comforting environment; a small group of participants who can only join if they have a referral from a collaborating organization or another survivor, to avoid the risk of a perpetrator joining; and a place that is set aside from the main areas of the YWCA where the program takes place.

To ensure confidentiality, staff and peer support members are trained in maintaining privacy and discretion. As mentioned above, the program also uses a designated space in a separate building at the YWCA to protect access to Project CARE’s peer support and other activities. This is of heightened importance to survivors who have experienced violence, so they are in an environment where they are free from harm and open to learning and self-expression. During the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, Project CARE worked to maintain a safe environment through shifting its in-person classes to secure, private online platforms using social

media. Some meetings are also shifting to video meeting platforms as participants get equipped with needed devices and internet connections.

Peer Support Members. Participants begin with education and training about healthy sexual encounters, means to stay safe, and the dynamics of abuse. Peer support members lead or participate in these classes. They provide leadership and encouragement for participants to express themselves by serving as a general “welcome wagon” and cheerleader for others as they enter Project CARE. An interviewee explained that peer support members make new participants feel like they are getting “a big warm hug” and as the relationships among peers grow, peer support members “build a big house to help [others].” Project CARE staff describe peer support members as “the heart and soul” of the program. They build the trust—through shared experiences and an emphasis on empowerment—that creates the peer support community.

Peer support members work diligently with individuals to help them identify their passions and needs. For example, if staff learn about a specific topic or issue of importance to a participant they will focus the class on this topic or issue. The peer support process is fluid and evolves as participants begin to propose ideas for classes. Staff and peer support members encourage participants to lead classes of their own design. During most weeks, six sessions are available at Project CARE—male Safety Training and Risk Reduction (STARR) class for healthy and safe relationships, female STARR class, female support group, all-gender support group, art expression class, and either a peer support team meeting or a volunteer team meeting. Lack of transportation, high anxiety levels, and shyness are key barriers to new participants’ engaging in the peer community at Project CARE. But, as a peer support member commented in an interview, once someone joins Project CARE, “They don’t stay shy for long.”

Project CARE has found that the most effective strategy for implementing peer supports is to treat “people as people and not their diagnosis,” an interviewee explained. It is critical that survivors with disabilities are the ones leading and supporting their peers. The peer networks are sustained because survivors have built authentic connections.



Key Outcomes and Measurements

Project CARE staff convey that its most notable outcomes are anecdotal. They feel they have been successful when a participant starts speaking more, using language of empowerment, leading sessions, and not tolerating poor-quality or abusive caregivers. Multiple former participants expressed how Project CARE literally saved their lives by helping them leave dangerous situations or stop destructive behaviors such as drug abuse. Staff and peer support members also observe that key outcomes are participants' development of friendships within the peer networks. These connections help them understand what a healthy relationship feels like and how to be a good friend in a relationship.

To complement these stories of success, Project CARE also tracks the number of

- survivors served by disability, race, ethnicity, gender, and type of violence experienced;
- events hosted, number and type of attendees, and topics covered;
- people trained;
- coordinated community response activities such as referrals, consultations, technical assistance, and meetings; and
- calls and/or requests from survivors.

From January to June 2020, Project CARE served more than 34 survivors, all of whom have disabilities. Project CARE trained 31 people in victim advocacy and held eight educational sessions to raise public awareness about sexual assault and domestic violence among people with disabilities.

Lessons Learned and Key Considerations for Social Capital Integration

Everyone we interviewed noted that peer support members are the key ingredient in Project CARE. Their personal experiences with trauma, growth, and empowerment are the reason Project CARE can do this work. Without peer support members, establishing trust with new participants would be more difficult. Peer support members play a central role in three lessons learned for integrating peer supports into domestic violence programs: incorporate creativity, train and set examples for empowerment, and provide leadership opportunities.

Incorporate outlets for creativity and expression among peers. Staff and peer support members help Project CARE provide tailored outlets for everyone to find a voice and carve out an individual healing process through classes that range from art

to creative writing to public speaking. An interviewee explained that helping to draw out the creativity in survivors helps them see themselves not as their disabilities but as creative people. With participants joining many different kinds of creative classes, they get to learn from and build relationships with each other through work toward self-expression in small group settings.

Embed training, language, and individual experience of empowerment. Project CARE trains and empowers participants to find their strength and build healthy relationships by providing a place for ongoing classes and peer connections. An interviewee described that once the process begins, participants' strengths, individuality, and belief in themselves "begins to pour out." She added that the peer support members' ability to foster "very emotional intense personal conversations knocks down silos as they work together." Participants often initially distrust organizations and institutions, but seeing empowered peer support members has "changed the game" for the program. Having an empowered peer invite others into the safe space and speak openly enables them to build a strong community through peer supports.

Provide leadership opportunities and connections with others in the community for participants and peer support members. Peer support members pointed out that one of the most life-changing experiences in their positions at Project CARE was the opportunity to lead and thus discover their own potential. Interviewees expressed that staff consistently encourage participants and peer support members to develop leadership skills, such as by leading weekly classes at Project CARE. Other leadership opportunities are offered by Project CARE's collaborative partners. For example, some participants sit on the county's human rights commission, making connections and sharing their perspectives with this local group of professionals and volunteers who provide independent oversight in matters related to the rights of people with developmental disabilities. An interviewee observed that this service on the commission benefits participants because it validates that they have something to offer to the broader community. It is valued by the commission because the perspective and insights of Project CARE participants help it more effectively fulfill its mission of reaching and assisting others in the community with authenticity.

¹ <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/How-safe-are-americans-with-disabilities-web.pdf> ↗

² Project CARE website: <https://www.ywcacincinnati.org/our-programs/violenceprevention-and-intervention/intervention-services/> ↗