

STARTING A DRUGLINE



THE DOS AND DON'TS OF ORGANISING VOLUNTEER-BASED SERVICES FOR DRUG USERS

TURNING POINT's Drugline in Birmingham has been operating since 1982. With little official funding available, the Drugline model was based on initial telephone contact with specially trained volunteers. In initiating and running the first of these, we learned a great deal about the don'ts of such a model as well as the dos, and it may be our experience will benefit others thinking along similar lines.

Many volunteer-based services for substance abusers are now being set up in communities served by inadequate facilities. In the enthusiasm to 'do something', some are being opened without adequate preliminary work. Having made a premature start, projects are likely to fail after a short while. So when thinking of setting up such a project, it is important to make several decisions well in advance.

► Why use volunteers? What are your expectations? Do you want volunteers as telephone receptionists and information-givers, or will you train them as counsellors?

► If as counsellors, will they do telephone work only or also face to face interviews? Will they be there only as a back-up for paid professionals?

► What kind of service are you planning? Will you cover the whole spectrum of substances, from solvents to illegal drugs? Will you include prescribed drugs? What about alcohol?

► How many hours will you be available? What about evenings/Saturdays?

Answers to questions such as these will dictate your future actions in the areas of premises, recruitment, selection, training and supervision.

PREMISES need to be relevant to local needs. In an urban area, the need is for a central, reasonably unobtrusive venue easily reached from outlying districts, possibly with evening access. If your project is in a small, scattered country community, you may need one main office plus one or two 'satellites', and your volunteers should accordingly be recruited from the surrounding areas.

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One of Britain's most experienced organisers of volunteer-based drug projects guides us through the pitfalls of starting a 'Drugline'-type service. Using volunteers is no 'easy option'. Lack of planning and support can, she says, spell disaster.

Joan Goode

RECRUITMENT of volunteers is usually not too difficult. The local media can be helpful in placing advertisements, as can libraries, volunteer bureaux and local college and university student unions. Low-key publicity may assist, though any sensational stories should be discouraged.

Efforts should be made to build a team which will reflect the make-up of the community it is intended to serve, so inclusion of black counsellors and those who specially identify with other ethnic groups may need to be facilitated. It could also be helpful to have people fluent in local languages and dialects. Gays can be contacted through community venues used by them.

SELECTION is perhaps the most crucial area in setting up the project. The response to any application should be the sending of a 'job description' and a formal application form to be completed, so that expectations are realistic and time-wasting on both sides avoided. Two references should be taken up. Volunteers must be interviewed, preferably by more than one person. During the interview, questions should be asked to test attitudes to a variety of subjects — difficult areas such as AIDS, sexuality, and racism, as well as motivation, confidentiality, availability for duty, and health.

After discussion with other staff, applicants should be informed quickly by post of their acceptance or unsuitability. Most will be genuine, but it should be borne in mind that a stringent selection procedure will lessen the possibility of clients being put at risk, and other volunteers being adversely affected. Applicants will be reassured rather than offended by the care paid to their acceptance by the project.

TRAINING for volunteers should provide factual information about drugs and their effects and training in counselling 'techniques', including practical exercises and role-plays. Outside speakers can be

brought in for special subjects and in some cases inter-agency liaison can be of mutual benefit. The course should encourage growth in confidence and knowledge, help identify 'hang-ups' (particularly regarding sex, race and religion), promote listening skills, and curb those who talk rather than listen to clients.

A second interview before final acceptance for duty is essential. In accepting people as counsellors, the project should also emphasise the need for a continuing commitment to in-service training at regular intervals.

SUPERVISION is the final area of importance. It is essential that voluntary counsellors receive regular personal supervision in a way which will support a mutual growth and learning process, and enable counsellors to identify strengths and overcome limitations. Each session should explore difficulties and in particular discuss specific case histories. It should thus be possible to ensure personal conflicts are resolved and that no circumstances are causing stress. Reinforcement such as praise, thanks and appreciation of particularly good elements of counselling, should also be included.

USING VOLUNTEERS can shore up insufficient funding and allow a project to provide essential services to the community. They bring with them strong motivation to confront the issues of the day, to gain experience, and sometimes to define their identity. If these motives are coupled with tolerance, flexibility and a degree of objectivity, then volunteers can form a strong core to any project. They often make relationships more easily than professional staff, and are able to bring to the project insight and sensitivity to the feelings of others, often based on their own experiences. They don't 'go by the book', since they probably haven't read it!

But it has to be said that setting up a Drugline project is no easy option. There will inevitably be times when unexpected gaps appear in the rota: holiday periods are particularly difficult. There is no control over commitment. And volunteers need just as much time spent on them in terms of training and supervision as paid workers. Working with volunteers requires paid workers to be constantly aware of where the project is heading, since volunteers can — and will — ask awkward questions, and expect answers. And that, as they say, can't be bad! □