



Implementation of a Peer Support Program for Campus First Responders

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Abstract

The Carleton University Student Emergency Response Team (CUSERT) is comprised of 45 on-call volunteers who respond to medical situations on-campus. Due to increased call volume and concerns surrounding first responder mental health being brought to the forefront nationwide, CUSERT identified a need for responder support by individuals with shared experience. A Peer Support program was implemented in October 2019.

This program was developed following an assessment of CUSERT's unique needs. Three members received training through the First Responder Peer and Trauma Support System (FR-PATSS) course. CUSERT then launched a Peer Support program comprised of 1-on-1 and group sessions, as well as a library of resources.

Surveys have measured team satisfaction with CUSERT's Peer Support program and provided the opportunity for members to make suggestions. The program was well-received and will continue for the next academic year. Continuous evaluation will occur to ensure that the program is meeting its goals and remaining cost-effective.

The implementation of this program is one step CUSERT has taken towards improving mental health support for campus first responders. Peer Support is an important resource for campus first responders to have access to, due to the unique nature of our role. We hope to expand the program to include other members of Carleton's Campus Safety Services.

Introduction

The Carleton University Student Emergency Response Team (CUSERT) was established in 1999 and is currently operating with a roster of approximately 45 student volunteers. CUSERT has seen a rising trend in calls for service in recent years, with well over 500 in the past academic year alone. With first responder mental health being at the forefront of concern, an increase in call volume, and a unique set of needs of its responders, CUSERT identified the opportunity to implement a Peer Support program and mental health policy. To our knowledge, no other campus response team in Canada has designed its own responder-specific Peer Support program. The Peer Support program aims to improve the mental health and resilience of CUSERT's responders while connecting them with vetted resources.

Development/Implementation

Timeline

March 2019	CUSERT surveys responders and identifies unmet needs
April 2019	Proposal for Peer Support program submitted and approved
October 2019	3 members attended FR-PATSS training and program was launched
November 2019	First Peer Support session occurs
December 2019	Mental Wellness Library was established in the CUSERT office
January 2020	CUSERT begins assisting Carleton's Campus Safety Services with establishing their Peer Support program

The CUSERT Peer Support program began after a group of members and alumni identified the need for better mental health resources for CUSERT responders. At the time, responders had access to counseling through the Employee Assistance Program or Carleton's Health Services, however long wait times and the complexity of accessing care made these undesirable options. After deliberations and team surveys, a Peer Support program was identified as a way to help alleviate the gap in mental health care.

In the fall of 2019, CUSERT sent three responders who expressed interest in the program for formal training. The FR-PATSS training is an intensive, 2-day program created in partnership between the Mood Disorders Society of Canada and based on guidelines from the Mental Health Commission of Canada. Information learned through this training along with inspiration from local first responder Peer Support teams formed the basis of CUSERT's Peer Support policies and procedures.



Discussion and Conclusions

Based on survey responses, the program has been well-received by the team and will continue in the following academic year. Even in its infancy, the program is seeing a good rate of use and participants are happy with the way sessions are run.

The main challenges associated with the program's implementation are the availability of training and ensuring the continuity of the program from year to year. Currently, the FR-PATSS course is only offered twice a year in the Ottawa area. As well, it may be difficult to ensure a seamless transition of the program from year to year with frequent personnel changes and different people assuming leadership positions.

One of the limitations of the program is its relatively small size. We would like for the Peer Supporters to be representative of the team (including year-standing, gender, past experiences, etc.), however frequent graduation of trained members and limited resources may make this difficult. We recognize that use of the program may vary year-to-year depending on the comfort of responders with using the program and their susceptibility to trauma, as well as the frequency of high-stress calls.

The FR-PATSS course instructs participants on the development and implementation of a Peer Support program as well as on how to provide Peer Support. Now that the program has been established and its framework developed, we no longer see a need for all Peer Supporters to receive this training. In the future, we are interested in creating a Peer Support Coordinator position for CUSERT. This individual would be trained in the FR-PATSS course and would oversee the program. Other Peer Supporters could then be selected and trained by the coordinator to reduce costs and ensure its sustainability.

The Peer Support team is continuing to build on our bank of mental health resources, with the goal of each resource being vetted before its recommendation to team members. We are currently assisting Carleton's Campus Safety Services with the implementation of a program for Special Constables and Student Security Patrollers and intend to integrate our program with theirs in the future. We have also discussed the possibility of expanding the program to include public transit Special Constables in Ottawa. This would give us access to more resources, increase the diversity of Peer Supporters, and ensure the program's continuity.

Program Evaluation

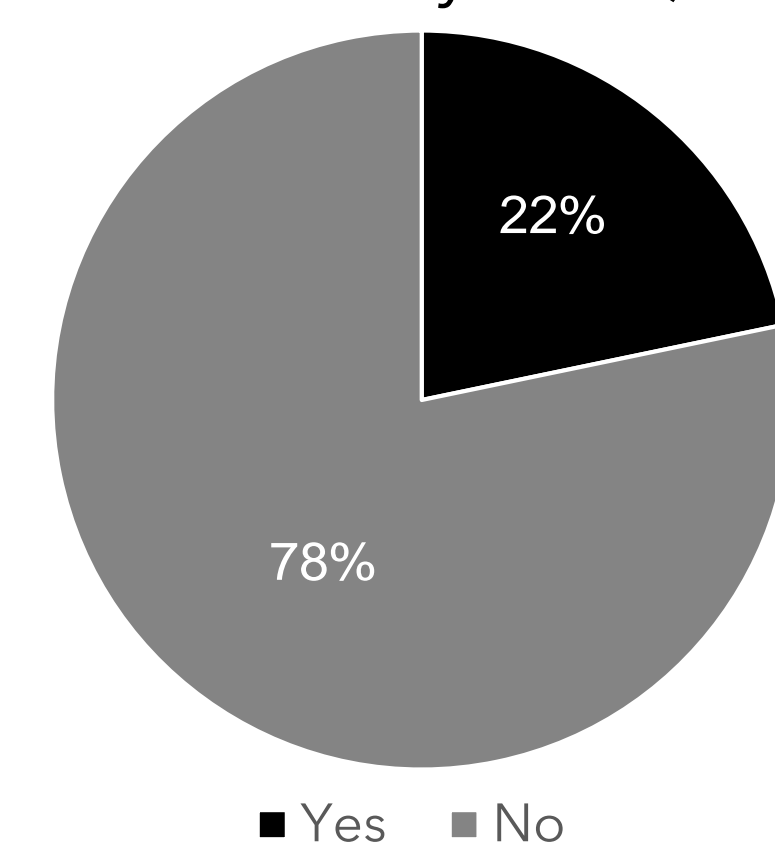
Program evaluation was conducted using a survey distributed to team members. The main survey measured knowledge of the program, attitudes towards the program, likelihood of use, and provided a space for comments and suggestions. If members indicated that they had received Peer Support, they were prompted to rate their experience(s).

91% of respondents were able to identify the purpose of the program and the names of the three trained Peer Supporters

Likelihood of seeking assistance from various sources in the case of a personal problem was assessed using a Likert scale with 1=very unlikely and 5=very likely¹. n=23

Source of assistance	Score (1-5 ± std dev)
Family member	3.00 ± 1.35
Friend	4.17 ± 0.58
Counsellor	2.78 ± 1.09
Employee Assistance Program	2.57 ± 1.04
Phone helpline	1.91 ± 0.79
Peer Support	3.21 ± 0.90

Have you ever received Peer Support? (November 2019 to February 2020)



Attitudes towards the program were assessed using a Likert scale with 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree. n=22

Statement ("The Peer Support program...")	Score (1-5 ± std dev)
Is something I feel comfortable using	3.59 ± 0.85
Is important for the mental health of CUSERT responders	4.05 ± 0.72
Is meeting a preciously un-met need	3.86 ± 0.71
Is a waste of CUSERT resources	1.55 ± 0.6
Is completely confidential	3.32 ± 0.89
Should continue in the next academic year	4.41 ± 0.59
Is something I would never use	2.50 ± 0.86

100% of respondents who had received Peer Support agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements²:

- I felt heard, understood, and respected.
- We worked on and talked about what I wanted to work on and talk about.
- The Peer Supporter's approach was a good fit for me.
- Overall, the experience was right for me.

References

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