



The My Circle project was an attempt to respond in a meaningful way to the adults on the North Shore who were coming in and out of the health and justice systems. The need has been identified at the Network table many times to support and assist these adults for a sufficient period of time to ensure they have a well-established personal network around them. Often community agencies have difficulty collaborating to provide service to adults at risk and the My Circle model was an attempt to improve the response to such adults.

The idea stemmed from a highly successful model called Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA), in which a number of trained community volunteers form a network around high-risk individuals exiting correctional facilities. The role of the volunteer is to provide both support and accountability and ease the pains of reintegration and connect their ‘core member’ to community. This approach has well documented success since its inception in 1998. The beauty of the model is the “circle” approach where each volunteer can offer care, support, practical assistance, and connection to the member while also supporting one another.

This model was adapted to create the My Circle initiative which was a pilot project sponsored by the NS Adults Support Network with funding from the BCACRN’s Vanguard Project. The work of the pilot was primarily conducted by CMHA and the North Shore Restorative Justice Society who worked together to recruit, train, and support volunteers as well as screen and accept appropriate client referrals. Other partners included Victims Services and Vancouver Coastal Health. All partners were aware of the project and could offer referrals or be consulted along the way.

Although the pilot was thought to be able to recruit 12 volunteers and serve 6-8 clients, at the conclusion of the project 6 volunteers had been trained and 3 clients had been served. The lack of volunteers could be explained by an overall lack of response to the ad to recruit volunteers which ran through the summer. The low client numbers were directly related to the low number of volunteers as each Circle was to have 3 volunteers. Given the sensitive nature of the work and the demands of the clients, we wanted to ensure volunteers were focused on one Circle at a time to ensure the highest quality service to the client.

The following points outline what was learned and offers some future recommendations. The material presented is based on debriefings and feedback provided by the volunteers, clients, and stakeholders.

What was learned:

- 1) A minimum of two volunteers are required for each Circle and sometimes 3 is too many. Three volunteers may overwhelm the client and often 2 can manage the needs and offer adequate support to one another. This is especially true when the host/referral agency (i.e. CMHA) is actively involved in supporting the client.
- 2) Monthly meetings of the Circle and the host/referral agency are very important. These allow for check-ins and opportunities to talk about the future. At all these meetings, it is important for the client to be involved and present. These meetings create a sense of

mutual support and accountability and allow for transparency and information sharing. Often scheduling can be the largest hurdle in having the meetings happen.

- 3) Training was 4 weeks long and it was found to be adequate to introduce the topics that volunteers may face when interacting with the client. Suicide was found to be an issue with one client, therefore, future training should include a component on suicide awareness.
- 4) Volunteers should be of diverse ages and backgrounds with different interests. This allows clients to be better served all around.
- 5) Having more than one volunteer assigned to a client really works for volunteers. It allows them to be supported and not feel they need to “have all the answers.” Debriefing between volunteers took place and allowed for stress management and better care for themselves and the client.
- 6) Training in collaboration with agencies works well as it allowed for sharing of resources as well as a back up, if required. Specialized guest speakers were very beneficial to the volunteers and facilitation was well done and smooth when conducted by Restorative Justice. Modeling the circle process in training was effective and allowed for connection and people sharing their knowledge and experience.
- 7) On-going support and information sharing between the volunteers and the referring agency is very important. When this does not occur, gaps and miscommunications can arise. Monthly meetings along with weekly email updates from Volunteer to the referring agency are imperative.
- 8) Although having clear roles and responsibilities are important, the role of the Volunteer is more fluid than originally envisioned. Work must be done to establish boundaries that the referring agency and volunteer are both comfortable with, while allowing flexibility and discretion on the part of the volunteer so they may be responsive to the changing needs of the client.
- 9) Liability issues are important to discuss – depending on the activities of the volunteer and client, the risk differs. For example, activities in public are less risky than in the client’s home. These activities must be carefully thought through and documented.
- 10) Strong oversight and coordination is required from the host agency. This ensures smooth communication between all parties – volunteers, referring agencies, other helping professionals, and the client.
- 11) While all clients did appear to benefit from being part of a Circle, those clients who were in crisis benefited the least. More appropriate referrals involved those who were relatively stable in terms of the mental health needs.
- 12) Being part of a Circle promotes and enhances client capacity to engage with other resources. Supportive counseling to take advantage of this access was found to be an essential complementary element for some of the My Circle clients.
- 13) The clients appreciated the opportunity to be a part of My Circle. They had good things to say about their experience with the volunteers.

Recommendations

- 1) Suicide awareness and prevention, personal triggers, self-awareness, and greater education on the role of the volunteer should be made part of Volunteer Training

- 2) A three month follow up should be held with the Volunteers once the training has been completed. This will allow volunteers to talk and share learning about their experiences with clients.
- 3) Meetings of the Circle should always involve the client and the referring agency. These meetings should be conducted using a circle process so that each participant can share their perspective and power/airtime is balanced.
- 4) Roles, responsibilities and expectations of the client, the volunteer and the referring agency need to be more clearly laid out during the referral process. These expectations should be carefully documented and well understood by all parties prior to the start of the Circle.
- 5) Strong, well resourced Coordination is a necessity for the My Circle project to be workable and sustainable.