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Strengthening Organizations, Strengthening Communities

WAYS PROFESSIONALS CAN SUPPORT YOU IN YOUR EFFORTS

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www.selfhelpgroups.org*

Before and after developing a group, you can tap professionals and professional agencies for group support in a variety of ways. Many professionals are ready to help, but seldom are asked. But not all professionals understand the value of a member-run self-help group. Unfortunately, as has been pointed out in several national reports (such as that of the 1986 Surgeon General's Workshop on Self-Help and Public Health), there still is a clear lack of professional training on the subject of self-help groups. You may find, then, that to varying degrees you will have to educate and sensitize professionals to the value of and need for self-help groups such as your own. This is best done through personal contact. You can begin by sending them a letter, noting the isolation and problems that many individuals face, and the value of sharing ideas and information.

Here are some roles that professionals play in helping to develop support groups. We hope that they can give you a better sense of the various possibilities you have.

1. **"Co-Founder Finder"** - If you are interested in starting a group, you should be looking for a few other caregivers, who are willing to help in the effort as part of a core group or steering committee. This prevents you from having to "do it all," and burning yourself out down the road. A professional (social services worker, clergy, doctor, representative of local office on aging, etc.) can sometimes help you to find those people by identifying those whom they know, who may be caregivers interested in being co-founders of the group.
2. **Group Development Supporter** - Professionals can support you in the development of a group in additional ways. Well before you have your first group meeting, a sensitive and supportive professional could make your work easier by providing you with information, local contacts, public acknowledgment, moral support, and help with the planning of a group. For example, if you decide to contact local newspaper editors to advise them of your plans to help start a group, it is often helpful to have previously asked a professional, who specializes in the area, if they would consent to an interview by a reporter on the illness or issue. The editor might be more inclined to cover your story if you provided the professional's name. Any resulting article that included quotes from a supportive professional would usually help establish your credibility. Copies of such articles could then be used to open other doors, convince other professionals, or be an enclosure in a letter that "tells your story."
3. **Provider of Practical Support** - Provides concrete support to self-help groups such as meeting room, phone, secretarial support, photocopying, printing your handouts or newsletter, mailings, coffee & refreshments, student interns, obtaining videotapes/films, holding educational workshops, etc. Don't limit your idea of professionals to just health or mental health professionals. Think of how clergy, YMCA staff, Cooperative Extension, library, Junior League, or other "community-service oriented" professionals might help.

4. **Networker or Linking Agent** - Helps match your self-help group needs with the appropriate community resources, and vice versa. This might involve finding needed meeting space, clerical support, interns, speakers, media or other resources for your self-help group from other agencies, community and volunteer groups, e.g., bringing together a self-help group (that is looking for a less expensive alternative to a poor answering service that they pay for) with a volunteer helpline (that is seeking to increase its call rate in order to satisfy and retain volunteers). It might also involve bringing together self-help groups of similar concerns for possible coalition development.
5. **Referrals Provider** - Referring people they serve to existing groups is the most common of professional roles. Professionals can also be asked to advise other professionals of the group, speak at staff meetings, make announcements at agency coalition meetings, place notices on office bulletin boards or in professional publications, etc., in order to promote those referrals.
6. **Consultant** - The consultant has the task of providing technical assistance in areas of special need. A consultant advises the group on what he or she feels are the best answers to particular problems, but respects the group's right to make the final decision. Consultation focuses on specific needs or problems and might deal with issues like group development, organizational problems, improved group dynamics, program development, or fund-raising. Examples of this might be assisting with the publication of a brochure or local service directory, advising groups on sustaining membership, and/or doing outreach to recruit new members.
7. **Advisor** - This role is very similar to that of consultant except for the time commitment involved. A consultant may be called upon on an as-needed basis, whereas an advisor's assistance can be ongoing. Many self-help groups can use various professionals for extended periods of time on a group advisory committee in order to: tap their professional opinion and expertise on matters of group policy and action; provide consultation on particular cases and issues as needed; and in general, to help legitimize the group. Professionals can be from various fields, to possibly include a lawyer, public relations specialist, mental health professional, nurse, health educator, clergyman, etc.
8. **Guest Speaker** - at self-help group meetings and conferences. Many professionals seek such opportunities to promote their specialty programs, services and practices. You have the power as a group to attract professionals from various fields to speak for free, who would otherwise charge a significant amount of money for that same time and expertise if it was for any individual member of the group.
9. **Educator** - Educating other professionals to the value, benefits and appropriateness of self-help groups. This can be done by including group representatives in the process whenever possible, e.g., inviting them to speak at staff meetings, agency coalition meetings, or on conference and workshop panels.
10. **Advocate** - A professional who works to promote and advocate for the interests of the group (as well as for a better understanding of the group, its issues and needs) with one's own agency, discipline, community, government, legislature, and the larger society. They can advocate for group representation on agency and governmental planning or advisory boards. Work might include such efforts as seeking specific group goals in professional circles, promoting needed legislation, or seeking funding. Could include introducing policies that support or include groups in service development or operations, testifying at hearings, helping with the introduction of legislation, etc.
11. **Trainer** - Provides training as requested or needed by the group, e.g., on coping, helping, or self-advocacy skills.
12. **Mediator** - If the group faces severe internal conflict, professionals can act as objective third parties when all other avenues have been explored in conflict resolution. They may act as safety valves in handling potentially explosive situations. This must be done with group approval/sanction in order to be effective.
13. **Researcher** - As requested by the group, develops research programs evaluating group process, group programs, training and services; researches the medical or other

problems that members face; helps to survey and document the extent of caregiver problems in the community, to help make your case for needed services; assists groups in developing their own research and evaluation programs, or jointly sponsors a research project.

14. Resource Person - Either attending meetings or being more informally "on call;" but in either case, to contribute to the group when needed. This is especially true of some self-help groups that are closely affiliated with a particular agency or service, wherein the professional might also serve as a liaison person, being always available to answer questions about agency services and issues.

15. "Recognition Giver" - Publicly acknowledging the contributions of specific groups or members of groups through citation in the media, agency newsletter, professional publications and newsletters, and through actual awards from agencies, professional associations, and community organizations. Keep in mind that self-help groups can also recognize good professional support by giving supportive professionals awards of their own.

What is in it for the Professional?

Understand how helpful your group can be to professionals. Professionals can benefit from collaborative efforts with self-help groups in a number of ways. Here are but a few:

- Opportunity to increase referrals to their agencies and services.
- For some, the opportunity to better learn what it is really like to be a caregiver in a way they cannot learn from journal articles or classes.
- Good community and public relations for the professional, i.e., opportunity to increase their own visibility and, if affiliated, that of their agency via newspaper articles, your group newsletter, public speaking opportunities.
- Personal satisfaction of those sensitive professionals who recognize and are dedicated to the value of self-help groups.
- Self-help groups might help advocate for needed professional services and agency programs or professional research.
- Opportunity to help meet their client's needs for emotional support, understanding and practical education that cannot be met by professional services.

When benefits accrue to both the professional and to the group, the relationship is reciprocal. Such an environment encourages cooperation rather than competition. This is the ideal relationship. After you start your group, consider letting professionals know about your success stories, invite them to attend or speak at your meetings, or send them handouts or articles that educate them to how your self-help group or groups in general help people.