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*Strengthening Organizations, Strengthening Communities*

## WELCOMING A NEW MEMBER TO YOUR SELF-HELP GROUP

The decision to attend a self-help group may not come easily for potential group members. It may be preceded by a family crisis, a life threatening or chronic illness, or personal needs. Whatever the circumstances, it may be safe to assume that potential group members bring to the first meeting a sense of hope for better times tempered by uncertainty. There are a number of steps long-standing group members can take to assure that those who are attending for the first time will feel welcome and find the first group meeting to be a positive experience:

- Designate a member who has been a long-time group member to welcome new members. This person should be stationed near the door to offer a handshake and a name to the first-time attendee. "Welcoming" duties can be rotated monthly.
- Don't abandon the new person once he/she has been welcomed. Make sure the person finds a place for his/her coat, has a cup of coffee, and is seated next to another group member who can be counted on to make the new person feel at home before the meeting starts.
- Remember to introduce new members to everyone present at the meeting.
- New members should be given the opportunity to contribute to the group. They may want to share their concern at the first meeting or they may not. In either case, respecting their wishes will make them feel at ease in a group situation.
- It may be helpful sometime during the meeting to review policies of the group both to inform the new member and to refresh long-time members.
- After the meeting is over, the new members may offer to help with moving the chairs or straightening the meeting room. Such offers should be acknowledged and encouraged as the new member seeks to find a place within the group.
- If yours is a meeting in which names and phone numbers are exchanged and the new member opts to add his/her information to the list, remember to call several days after the meeting to answer any possible questions and to express appreciation for his/her attending the meeting.
- A call to the new member a few days before the next meeting is also appropriate.
- The new member should be warmly welcomed at the second meeting by the same person who greeted him/her at the first, even if that person is not the official greeter for the meeting. Seeing a familiar face is important to the second-time attendee.
- Long-time members should take a moment to remember when they were new in the group. It may also be helpful for long-standing members to discuss their initial expectations related to a group membership and summarize ways the group has been helpful. Such reflections bring home the importance of a friendly face and a kind word for the new member when he/she attends a self-help group for the first time.