

Starting a Peer Support Group

Launching a peer support group is relatively straightforward but does require some planning and coordination. The steps and considerations below will help you get started.

1. Seek organizational support

- ▶ Explain peer support and its benefits to key decision makers.
- ▶ Gain approval and support from the Executive Board and other leadership.

2. Define purpose and scope

- ▶ Determine the group's objective. Will it be recovery focused or more educational?
- ▶ Will more than one group be formed initially or in the future to meet different needs?
- ▶ Decide who the group is intended for: members only, their families or both.
- ▶ Consider whether it makes sense to partner with another LIUNA Local or international union.
- ▶ Will trained specialists or other professionals be invited to meetings to discuss specific topics?

3. Choose a venue: Select a meeting location that is accessible but still able to be confidential. This could be at a union hall or elsewhere.

4. Consider logistics

- ▶ How often will the group meet and for how long?
- ▶ Will people be asked to sign in?
- ▶ Will food or refreshments be provided? Who will cover the cost of these items?
- ▶ Who will be responsible for setting up? Consider sharing some responsibilities (e.g., door greeter, making coffee) among group members.

5. Promote the group

- ▶ Use available print channels, including posters and flyers, to get the word out.
- ▶ Use digital channels, including email, surveys, text blasts, messaging apps (e.g., WhatsApp) and social media, to reach potential participants.
- ▶ Let LIUNA affiliates in the area, such as training funds, organizing funds, LECET funds, health and welfare funds and regional health and safety funds, know about the group.

Choosing Support Group Leaders

A group leader or facilitator is tasked with opening and closing meetings, setting the tone for discussion and dealing with any problems that might arise during the meeting. An effective group leader should possess the following qualities:

- ▶ **Communication skills:** Good listening skills and the ability to connect with people.
- ▶ **Trustworthy:** Ability to maintain confidentiality and be perceived as trustworthy by group members.
- ▶ **Empathic:** Understanding and compassion are essential for fostering a supportive environment.
- ▶ **Personal experience:** Leaders with personal or shared experiences of recovery or loss can offer unique insights, credibility and connection to participants by sharing their own journeys.
- ▶ **Knowledgeable:** Leaders should be familiar with available resources and skilled at navigating these systems.

Peer support leaders are usually not clinically licensed, but it may be helpful to complete a training program such as the certification offered by Labor Assistance Professionals (LAP).

While not all peer support groups will focus on recovery from drugs or alcohol, if that is the focus of the group, it's recommended the support group leader be a person in long-term recovery (at least five years).

It's recommended that group leaders do not hold leadership positions in the union because the power dynamic might cause a member to feel they can't speak openly about sensitive issues.