At a Glance

Peer Support Groups for Parents
Best Practices

First 5 Los Angeles is in the process of creating a new program of peer support groups for parents in Los Angeles County. There will be 20 groups formed in each of five Supervisorial Districts, for a total of 100 groups. In preparation for an evaluation of the program, First 5 LA commissioned a literature review to discuss some of the most effective ways to determine if peer support groups are being implemented in an effective manner. In the process, certain best practices for peer support groups were also identified from the literature and are described below. This brief will exclusively look at best practices identified in the literature review. Peer support groups, which operate to provide information as well as a sense of community in order to combat feelings of isolation in one's struggles, need to be implemented in ways that take into consideration the topic area, target population, and goals of the program. Key considerations for a successful program include:

Facilitator Recruitment and Selection

- Identify people who have gone through the same experience. Parents that have first-hand experience with the support group topic are often selected as facilitator of the group.
- Recruitment of these parent facilitators is often done by word of mouth or recommendations from professionals. Medical and mental health professionals in the field are well suited to recommend past patients or participants that would make good peer facilitators. Alternatively, some programs partner with local community-based organizations to assist with the recruitment and training of peer support facilitators. Other methods for recruitment include flyers and ads in local newspapers.
- Facilitators who are knowledgeable about the culture of the group are more likely to have participant buy-in and to ensure that participants feel safe and comfortable.
- Another successful strategy is to utilize a team-based approach that offers the expertise of an experienced parent and a professional. This professional could be a nurse, social worker medical professional or mental health professional.
- Professionals can also be used as facilitators of support groups, but they should be trained on how to yield their role as authorities to allow participants to learn from each other.

Facilitator Training

- An important consideration of support groups is facilitator training. Training of facilitators often includes content training on the specific topic that the support group will address, as well as training on communication and facilitation skills.
In addition to initial training for facilitators, offering ongoing support and supervision of facilitators can be helpful. This ongoing support can include training, re-establishment of roles and responsibility or advice on any challenges that the peer support facilitators encounter.

### Participant Recruitment

- Recruitment of potential participants for peer support programs can vary based on the topic area and the target population. Often recruitment for peer support programs happen at hospitals, clinics and doctors’ offices or community organizations such as WIC.
- Community collaborations and connections can play an important role in the outreach; the referral process and recruitment can be done during community events. Peer support programs often partner with a community-based organization to conduct outreach for their programs or to hold support groups on-site at local agencies.
- Other methods for recruitment include word of mouth, newspaper listings, referrals, flyers and brochures.

### Intervention

- Peer support interventions are designed to give members emotional and social support, information, education, and networking opportunities. However, they can also offer participants access to additional forms of support beyond the group, such as one-on-one mentoring or help from professionals (such as counselors or social workers).
- Community-based implementation of peer support groups allows programs to adapt to meet the changing needs of the population that they serve. Most groups meet weekly but they can vary. Examples in the literature ranged from groups that meet weekly for one year to telephone support every two days for 28 days. The length of interventions and meeting intensity depends upon the purpose of the group.
- The program should have clear goals and boundaries. Groups with an open agenda can easily morph and change if there are not policies in place to establish a clear and explicit purpose of the group.
- Some programs establish a clearly defined leadership role. The leadership role is usually a paid or volunteer program coordinator that oversees the work of the volunteer facilitators, matches facilitators with participants, or offers guidance and support to facilitators.

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