

Jewish Seniors Alliance Peer Services Report for the 2021-2022 fiscal year

Firstly I would like to thank all of you who have supported Peer Support Services (PSS) in so many ways. Our programs are made possible through your financial contributions, guidance, directions, and your unwavering philosophical belief that regardless of age, demographics and belief systems all individuals should have the inherent right to live in dignity and to be the best that they can be. Everyone of you is in one way or another volunteering your time and expertise to JSA and thus you play a large part in making the communities served inclusive, caring and good places to live. Your partnership with JSA has been and is invaluable.

Looking retrospectively at this reporting period it was a year of adjustments. In the beginning Covid safety restrictions were firmly in place and social interactions outside individual bubbles were discouraged. Residents living in care facilities were at best allowed one specific visitor, and working from remote locations became the norm. The imposed safety measures were difficult for most but for vulnerable older adults they proved to be devastating, and for many resulted in severe feelings of loneliness and depression. PSS needed to **adjust service delivery** as one-to-one client contacts and home visits were no longer feasible. By using technological means such as Zoom, telephone and informational webinars, we were able to provide seamless regular emotional support services to approximately 175 clients plus their significant others, health professionals, case managers and social workers. Although these modes proved satisfactory, they were mere substitutes for those who craved personal contact.

As the number of Covid cases decreased some safety measures were loosened. Program staff in consultation with the Program Committee recommended that one-to-one services could be gradually reintroduced as long as safety measures such as: outdoors only, appropriate social distancing, and masking were in place. Neither clients nor service volunteers had any difficulties in **adjusting to the new rules** but saw them as the beginning of returning to a “new normal”. Toward the end of the reporting year the majority of the safety restrictions imposed by the Ministry of Health were lifted which allowed for the Friendly Visitor and Emotional Support

volunteers to once again make home visits. Again **adjustments in service delivery were required** as some clients and volunteers were reluctant to meet face-to-face.

When compared with the previous year's report, the client load had increased by 34 percent. This substantial rise indicates that strong efforts must be spent on volunteer recruitment activities. According to studies older adults constitute the largest volunteer pool but people from this age group are also avid travellers. Due to health restrictions, travelling has not been possible for over two years but with the abolishment of the travel restrictions seniors are packing their bags and are ready to go. With fewer individuals available to volunteer, it is likely that an already competitive market will intensify the demand. Volunteers play a large role not only in service provision but also in the economy. Studies have shown that emotional support provided by well trained peers has been effective in alleviating feelings of loneliness and low-grade depression in vulnerable older adults. JSA is dependent on its volunteer pool and without the willingness of peer services' volunteers to share their time and expertise, services would cease to exist. PSS staff and program committee members are very well aware of these issues and are in the process of developing recruitment strategies which will attract and maintain a healthy volunteer pool. To be competitive new methodologies may be needed and this requires introducing new ideas and actions which certainly means **adjusting to paradigm shifts**.

It is a pleasure to inform you that the Tech Library after a spotty beginning is going well. To maximize access each chromebook has been tailored to the user's individual needs and we have had excellent responses from volunteers who are tech savvy to serve as "tech coaches". A new addition to the support services is the "JSA one-to-one Supportive Walking Group". This service differs from the regular walking groups as it is for older adults who, due to health issues, are not able to walk either alone or in a group. The main referrals for these services come from health professionals. The Tech Library and the Supportive Walking Group have attracted volunteers from individuals younger than 55 years of age who want to do their part to make life easier for vulnerable older adults. Suitable **adjustments had to be made to the training curricula** as neither of the two mentioned programs offer peer support, but their volunteer roles need different kinds of skills that are equally valuable.

Last but not least, kudos must go out to the competent PSS staff who oversees all the services, performs volunteer management tasks and ensures that Quality Assurance is in place and always adheres to “best practices” criteria.

Thank you to: Grace Hann, Charles Leibovitch, Vicky Albarracin and Margot Beauchamp. You have done an excellent job.

Respectfully submitted
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