

# Guidelines for a Vicarious Trauma-Informed Organization

## Peer Support

### WHAT IS A VICARIOUS TRAUMA-INFORMED ORGANIZATION?

Vicarious trauma (VT), the exposure to the trauma experiences of others, is an occupational challenge for the fields of victim services, emergency medical services, fire services, law enforcement, and others. Working with victims of violence and trauma changes the worldview of responders and puts individuals and organizations at risk for a range of negative consequences (Bell, Kulkarni, and Dalton, 2003; McCann and Pearlman, 1990; Newell and MacNeil, 2010; Vicarious Trauma Institute, 2015; Pearlman and Saakvitne, 1995; Knight, 2013). A **vicarious trauma-informed organization** recognizes these challenges and proactively addresses the impact of vicarious trauma through policies, procedures, practices, and programs.

**For more information on vicarious trauma and its effects, visit <https://vtt.ovc.ojp.gov/>.**

(NOTE: Although these guidelines were created by a victim services organization, they contain insights and practices that first responder organizations can modify for their own use.)

### What Is Peer Support?

Peer support is a broad term that describes varied structures for worker-to-worker (rather than supervisor-to-worker) engagement so employees do not feel isolated and to help them address the impact of their exposure to trauma. Related terms include peer consultation, peer coaching, and peer debriefing, among others. Whether the peer support occurs between individuals or in groups, it provides colleagues with meaningful support and feedback, and helps leaders manage the consequences of VT among their staff and volunteers. It fosters a culture of caring, mutual support, professional self-awareness, and positive and constructive feedback (Pearlman and Saakvitne, 1995; Choi, 2011; McCann et al., 2013). Effective organizational leaders recognize, respect, and promote the value of peer support and create structured opportunities that are responsive to staff's needs. Peer support is most effective as an addition to regular, formal supervision, not a replacement for it. A few examples follow:

**Peer-to-peer support:** While informal support often occurs between colleagues, this is a more formal, regularly scheduled

option that is typically one-to-one, has a specific purpose, and is promoted and supported by the organization's leadership.

**Peer supervision:** A peer or other designated facilitator can serve as a group leader or take on informal supervisory responsibilities. When agencies provide relevant training for peer leaders, they can build their facilitation and debriefing skills, which ultimately benefits their colleagues as well. Peer supervision groups meet on a regular basis, are well supported by the organization's leadership, and enable staff and volunteers to identify, discuss, and address the effects of VT.

Peer support and peer supervision address vicarious trauma by—

- engendering mutual respect among participants, a key component of employee empowerment and effective work environments (Ortlepp and Friedman, 2002);
- increasing knowledge, empathy, and effective communication and feedback skills;
- creating opportunities to discuss the positive and negative effects of the work outside of formal supervision (Trippany, Kress, and Wilcoxon, 2004);
- establishing a pathway for raising issues with supervisors in safe and productive ways (Bell, Kulkarni, and Dalton, 2003);
- identifying gaps in staff knowledge and addressing them through education and building professional confidence;
- enabling participants to learn additional coping strategies from their colleagues that address the complexities and emotional effects of their work (McCann et al., 2013);
- developing leadership skills and serving as role models for one another (Trippany, Kress, and Wilcoxon, 2004; Catherall, 1995).

### Recommendations for Developing a Peer Support/Peer Supervision Program

Consider the type of peer support or peer supervision model that is best for your organization and staff: informal one-to-one peer support, formally structured peer-to-peer group debriefing, an alternative form of each, or a combination of the two. Instituting peer support and peer supervision presents both opportunities and challenges for

your organization. Whatever model you choose, thoughtful planning and implementation will help you achieve positive outcomes. The following tips can assist you in your efforts:

- Establish confidentiality protocols at the outset and ensure compliance with them.
- Identify, recruit, and train motivated and aspiring peer leaders within the organization.
- Develop agreements aimed at building trust and transparency, including—
  - o a statement of purpose and intended outcomes for participants that includes specific references to the impact of vicarious trauma;
  - o expectations, rights, and responsibilities of participants, including attendance and confidentiality requirements;
  - o a transparent plan that is clearly communicated organization-wide and that includes procedures for how members join and end their involvement in the group, how equitable participation is ensured, how the group is facilitated, and its duration; and
  - o evaluations that solicit input and feedback from participants to ensure that staff are satisfied and have achieved the stated goals.

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