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Building a Carer Support Group That is Sustainable

SECTION FOUR
CARER SUPPORT GROUP
FACILITATOR GUIDE

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Building a Carer Support Group That is Sustainable

Carers Victoria's aim is to help carer support groups to be sustainable. This means that we work to ensure your group can continue in an effective way into the future.

There are several factors that can affect a group's sustainability. These include:

- › Attracting enough new members.
- › Keeping members interested and coming along to the group.
- › Being able to identify and respond to changing needs of your group. This might include attracting new members with more diverse needs or seeking suggestions for change from within your group.
- › If you have the money or finances to meet the group's needs.
- › Having someone to support a group facilitator in their role or to take over when they retire (succession planning).

Attracting Members

In order to establish and attract members, answer the question: *Why would people want to join the group?*

Communicate the benefits of being a member, for example:

- › support in understanding what to expect when caring for someone with dementia
- › social outings with other carers
- › tips and advice on navigating the NDIS
- › sharing experiences with other Vietnamese carers
- › hearing from regular speakers about Autism.

So potential members are clear about what to expect and what benefits they will gain include a *Group Purpose Statement* or *Terms of Reference* with clear, concise statements about key aspects of your carer support group, and include in all materials you send out.

Examples of a Group Purpose Statement

"NDIS Carers Online is a closed Facebook group managed by Carers Victoria for families and carers of people transitioning to the NDIS. The goal is for the group to be a safe space to ask questions regarding the NDIS, share constructive ideas and work together respectfully."

"A monthly support and information evening for women between the ages of 45–60 who are caring for a spouse with early onset dementia."

Common ways of reaching people include:

- › through friends or people you know
- › writing an article for the local paper
- › distributing flyers and posters
- › radio announcements
- › through social media
- › through existing associations, for example Carers Victoria, Dementia Australia, Tandem, Little Dreamers, and
- › registering your group on the Carers Victoria carer support group directory by filling out the online form at www.carersvictoria.org.au/AddYourCarerSupportGroup.

Think about where your potential members might come from, or where they might generally look for information, try and find them, rather than them trying to find you.

For examples, advertise at:

- › local health care clinics or the local hospital
- › local council, service providers and cultural/community organisations
- › existing associations or institutions e.g. kindergarten, primary school, senior citizens
- › clubs, churches, or libraries.

It is a good idea for the facilitator to talk one-on-one with potential members before their first meeting to ensure:

- › the group purpose meets their needs, expectations and interests
- › they are a good fit for the group
- › to get an understanding of any skills they might bring to the group
- › they feel welcome.

Your group might want to keep growing or refresh itself so these approaches can work at all times.

To attract new members to an existing group, highlight achievements or activities of the group.

For example:

- › Successfully lobbied the local council to include more disabled parking spaces in the main street.
- › Fundraising drive at local supermarket raised funds to run a school holiday program.
- › Group had a fantastic day out visiting the Dandenong Ranges for a walk, lunch and Devonshire tea.
- › Learnt a lot about the changes to respite under the NDIS from our latest speaker.

Retaining Members

People will maintain their membership if they feel valued, have a sense of belonging, feel connected and supported. The nature and mode of the group may change over time, but if members continue to feel engaged, their needs are being met and the purpose of the group remains relevant to their situation, they are most likely to remain members.

Some points to remember:

- › ensure the group is run fairly and respectfully
- › encourage members to be actively involved, perhaps by volunteering to take on a particular role
- › encourage members to provide ideas and to take a lead on areas where they have a particular interest or skill
- › look for skills in members and draw on them
- › ensure the group delivers what it is set up to deliver
- › change up activities
- › consult with members; it is not your role to make all the decisions
- › support carers wellbeing
- › provide relevant information
- › group members should talk more than the group facilitator
- › find opportunities for group members for training or participating in conferences and seminars
- › be a place for carers to bounce ideas off one another
- › be a place for carers to encourage and support one another
- › ensure the venue, time commitment and times suit the members of the group
- › maintain consistent communication with group members.

Recognise individual's and group successes:

- › say 'thank you' regularly
- › give positive feedback based on your own observations
- › celebrate successes in your carer support group
- › organise a picnic, barbeque or other special outing
- › publicise the benefits and effects the group has for others.

Succession Planning

Why have a succession plan?

Succession planning helps ensure a group is sustainable over the longer term. With a succession plan and active engagement of other members, a group is more resilient to change, has the capacity to develop and grow, and has the agility to respond to challenges.

Having a succession plan ensures continuity and builds capacity of the group.

How to develop a succession plan

There are two main steps in developing and implementing a succession plan. They are planning and handover of information. We have developed two templates to help you develop and record the information required for these two steps. Refer to the section below on Templates for more information.

For your group to be sustainable you need to look ahead and envisage where it might be in five years' time:

- › Will you still have the energy, interest or time to be the facilitator of the group in five years' time?
- › What happens if you have an emergency and can't maintain your role?
- › What if you unexpectedly have an opportunity to move or take on a job, or need to increase your caring role?
- › Is there anyone in the group who can readily keep the group going? (This may be more than one person.)

Ideally you will have a group who share different tasks so that not every activity is dependent on one person. This will assist with succession planning as people will be used to being active participants in the running of the group. It also enables you and the group members to develop skills and identify what skills members have and what might be lacking for a facilitator role.

Succession planning requires careful consideration of questions like who will take over, what skills are needed, how long it will take, and what procedures or knowledge need to be passed on. While leading your group with succession planning in mind, your approach should:

- › Be proactive, not reactive.
- › Make succession planning a priority.
- › Leverage a systematic approach.
- › Be clear and flexible about what assistance you need from others.
- › Give potential successors a broad education.

Prepare for another team member to take over as facilitator:

- › Identify in the group member who has the right skills and interest to take over.
- › Be clear about what the role entails.
- › Enable others to take responsibility for task setting the right tone for working in partnership.
- › Consider having a 'deputy' to whom you can pass on information.

Establish an ongoing culture of the group to rotate the role between members. This rotation keeps people fresh, engaged and developing new skills. It also prepares the group for a full range of potential scenarios requiring succession:

- › short-term absence (e.g. travel, holiday, illness)
- › need for interim facilitator (e.g. extended holiday, extended illness, sudden resignation or unexpected unavailability)
- › permanent replacement (e.g. planned resignation or planned unavailability).

If and when the time comes for you to hand over:

- › Be open and communicate to the group when you are planning to step down or leave.
- › Prepare yourself to let go.
- › Allow some time for a transition period or handover period.
- › If possible, provide some training, mentoring or other support options to the incoming facilitator.
- › Be available as far as possible, and if you want to, act as a sounding board or adviser to the incoming facilitator.

Succession Planning Templates

Having a succession plan that everyone in your group understands will go a long way to ensuring continuity and builds capacity of the group. Throughout the succession planning process, you are encouraged to be prepared, consider what is needed in a systematic way, and communicate this clearly. There are two main steps in developing and initiating a succession plan. They are **planning** and **handover**. For many activities related to succession planning, it will be ideal to include other members of the group. In other instances, it might be simply about getting what you know down on paper.

Use the following template/s to help clarify what is needed for yourself, the group and potential successors:

1. Template for Succession Planning

How to identify, assess, and decide on who should be the new facilitator of the group when you decide to step down or need to take some time off.

<https://www.carersvictoria.org.au/media/6185/3565-section-4-succession-planning-template.pdf>

2. Template for Information Handover

What information new facilitator needs to know in their new role. Collect this information on the template, and use it as a guide to be sure that all operating information about the group is passed onto the new facilitator.

<https://www.carersvictoria.org.au/media/6184/3565-section-4-information-handover-template.pdf>



TIP

- › Prepare yourself.
- › Prepare the group.
- › Prepare your successor.

Other references which might help

Peer support networks: Recruiting additional members to keep the network fresh

www.carersvic.com.au/peerconnect-guide



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