

## **Vancouver Suicide Survivors Coalition**

### **Community Engagement Consultation**

#### **Introduction**

The Vancouver Suicide Survivors Coalition (VSSC) has been in existence since 2001, and funded since 2004 by the Consumer Initiative Fund (CIF) within Vancouver Community Mental Health Services, working in partnership with SAFER (Suicide Attempt Follow-up, Education and Research) and the Vancouver Crisis Centre. Run by and for survivors of suicide (people who have lost someone significant to suicide), the Coalition currently recruits new members via screening interviews, in order to ensure emotional safety regarding grief and loss issues.

The Coalition meets on a monthly basis at Evergreen Community Health Centre, and its purpose is to:

- Enable survivors of suicide to actively participate in advancing the suicide prevention agenda in greater Vancouver through education, advocacy and active networking efforts
- Reduce the stigma surrounding suicide
- Reduce the risks of suicide

The Coalition's work is focused on advocacy and awareness-raising projects: bereavement support for survivors is offered via other groups in the community. A total of 21 people have attended at least one monthly meeting in the last two years. Attendance at the monthly meetings is optional. An average of 4-8 people attend each meeting.

In April 2006, CIF staff and the VSSC Coordinator approached Community Engagement to assist with the Coalition's assessment of its past work, as well as planning for future projects.

#### **Methods**

Community Engagement (CE) staff conducted an email-based questionnaire, sent to the 21 Coalition members on April 27<sup>th</sup>, requesting responses by May 8<sup>th</sup>. Four responses were received. A focus group was also held on May 15<sup>th</sup>, scheduled during the regular monthly meeting. Eight people attended (including the CIF Committee Liaison Member), all women.

Both the questionnaire (see Appendix A) and focus group questions (see Appendix B) were developed by CE, CIF and VSSC personnel, and topics included:

- Member satisfaction with the VSSC's tasks and process
- SAFER's changing role in the VSSC
- Suggestions for the VSSC's future work

## **Findings**

### ***Member Expectations and Satisfaction***

Coalition members were asked about their expectations and satisfaction with the VSSC, for both the tasks and activities carried about by the group, as well as the emotional support provided.

### ***Tasks and Activities***

Some examples of how the Coalition currently meets its purpose (see page one) include:

- Provision of display boards at various branches of the Vancouver Public Library, for World Suicide Prevention Day (September 10<sup>th</sup>);
- Presentation of semi-annual education forums for members of the public
- Participation in focus groups to assist mental health professionals design appropriate research and services related to suicide
- Creation and administration of an internet-based mailing list to notify survivors about events and information

With regard to the Coalition's activities, questionnaire respondents and focus group members all agreed that the group is meeting its aims:

*“Yes, I feel we are trying to bring about suicide awareness to our community.”*

*“Many group members are active in different suicide prevention programs.”*

### ***Emotional Support***

The Organisational Vision of the VSSC (April 2004) sets a clear foundation for this group as an action-based coalition:

*“...for survivors of suicide who have sufficiently resolved their loss, to allow them to achieve a certain level of emotional distance from their loss, which enables*

*them to work in partnership with mental health professionals to achieve our aims.” (abridged)*

As part of the VSSC's funding agreement with CIF, it is emphasized that potential group members go through an interview process in order to keep the VSSC from turning into a bereavement group for new survivors. In the questionnaires and focus group as well, there was agreement amongst members that it is important for potential members to have done sufficient healing work before joining the Coalition, so they can stay focused on advocacy and maintain emotional health in this challenging field.

**In light of this need for emotional health, however, some members identified that it would be helpful for the group to provide somewhat more emotional support for each other:**

*“The subject matter can be overwhelming at times and the healing process for ourselves is ongoing. Our members are volunteering their time and expertise (the experience of losing a loved one), and we have to also emotionally support ourselves as well. I have gotten to know a few members by going to social events. As you get to know other members better, the emotional support goes up – this is very important!”*

*“We need some kind of ‘connection’ in this volunteer work – not just business.”*

*“I feel there could be more emotional support at times amongst members -- not just ‘business’ at the meetings.”*

*“People need support in any form of volunteer work -- to prevent burn-out.”*

Focus group participants engaged in a lively discussion, contributing suggestions for emotional support, such as:

- Hold some Coalition meetings at a member's home
- Add more social events for Coalition members
- Create an opportunity within the group for people to share their histories
- Add some kind of structured sharing at each session, especially when new members are present

Regarding the addition of a structured sharing format at each group, members recognized that some people want to share their stories while others do not necessarily want to share. Participation must, of course, be voluntary, and suggestions for the structure included:

*“Maybe a short, voluntary round to update each other (on our projects, and how we’re doing) at the beginning or end of each monthly meeting?”*

*“Check-in is important, both for the amount of work we’re doing, and emotional support.”*

**It is suggested that an opening or closing round at each session would be helpful**, in which each person speaks for a few minutes about activities they’re involved in, as well as any emotional issues they want to share. This mechanism for sharing need not lead the group to become support-focused, but may instead strengthen bonds between volunteer members, hence strengthening commitment to the work and ensuring group and individual health.

### ***SAFER’s Changing Role in the VSSC***

SAFER has worked in partnership with the VSSC since its inception, with a range of mutual services and benefits (see Appendix C for a complete list), for example, provision of a staff person at VSSC monthly meetings.

In the survey, people wrote about the importance of SAFER’s role in supporting the monthly meetings:

*“I have found the SAFER staff to be very professional and caring members of the group. They sit back, observe the meeting and then usually offer constructive feedback as well as criticisms. There are safety issues: they offer counselling, and they’re ‘grounding’.”*

*“The SAFER representative at our meetings is very important.”*

*“They provide focus when we are working on projects, and they add stability and professionalism -- along with wisdom -- to the group.”*

In the coming year, SAFER staff will no longer attend monthly meetings. They will continue to work in partnership with CIF and VSSC in other ways, but focus group members expressed surprise and some concern that SAFER staff would no longer be attending the monthly meetings, because there had been no explanation or notice regarding this change. Members wondered why staff had made this decision, and were unsure how (or whether) to pursue the answer.

**For the health of group dynamics, it is suggested that a SAFER staff representative attend a meeting to explain why they are no longer attending on a regular basis, and to offer closure with Coalition members.**

Looking forward, group members were also realistic in accepting this change in future meetings and some acknowledged that the Coalition can certainly continue on its own:

*“I feel our group is very professional and active on its own and could ask for ideas or advice outside of the meetings if needed.”*

**It was suggested that, although SAFER staff cannot attend each month, perhaps they could be asked to attend every three-six months, to meet a range of possible needs of the VSSC:**

- To facilitate periodic debriefing sessions: “How are people doing with this work?”
- To share and discuss new projects
- To provide objective, professional feedback and ideas

Group members felt it could also be beneficial for SAFER staff to attend some VSSC meetings, so that they remain up-to-date with the group’s work, and are informed on an ongoing basis regarding the issues for long-term survivors of suicide. It was also suggested that it would be interesting to have SAFER staff come to a Coalition meeting to share the new eight-week group-counselling model they are now using with survivors of suicide.

### ***Future Directions for the VSSC***

Both the questionnaires and focus group offered ideas for new or enhanced work for the Coalition in the future, such as:

- Produce more events (workshops, displays, public education forums) to raise awareness of the general public, and raise awareness about community supports for survivors
- Develop and facilitate workshops for survivors (for example, as part of SAFER’s eight-week counseling group) to address the shame/blame messages that silence survivors
- Develop educational materials (e.g. a pamphlet about the VSSC, with resources and key messages) for health professionals and the general public

### **What is our capacity, as individuals and as a group, to take on new tasks?**

Although members identified areas for potential growth of the Coalition’s work, it was also acknowledged that many people are already involved in several activities (for the Coalition as well as other volunteer work), and do not realistically have capacity for additional activities. As well, this is an emotionally demanding topic; sometimes members need time away from the group to cope with grief and loss issues. With a small number of members, it is difficult for the VSSC to take on more tasks, potentially over-burdening already-busy volunteers.

**It was strongly suggested by group members that the VSSC needs to recruit new members:**

*“There are so many things we can work on as a group, but only a couple of things at a time unless we get more members.”*

### **Recruitment**

Recruitment was strongly suggested, in both questionnaires and the focus group, for the VSSC’s work in the year to come. It was agreed that thorough screening of potential members is still very important so that survivors are assessed for readiness in this type of volunteer work, and the following ideas were offered for recruitment methods:

- Add a recruitment notice to any brochure developed by the Coalition about its work
- Place an ad or write an article in newspapers
- Develop a recruitment notice for people’s email networks
- Provide recruitment information at VSSC public events
- Developing a link on the VCH website, via CIF
- Place an entry in the Red Book

Group members also asked if non-survivors should be considered for recruitment. This point was not discussed at length, but concerns were raised regarding the practical element of CIF’s funding requirement that members of the group be suicide survivors. As well, issues of emotional sensitivity within the group will need to be considered in future group dynamics.

On the topic of more widespread recruitment methods, a challenge was discussed regarding whose phone number and email address would be the point of contact for interested applicants:

*“We must be conscious of the screening in all this: what phone number do we put on recruiting information? On the one hand we do want to expand, but we don’t want to overwhelm SAFER or CIF with phone calls.”*

It is suggested that VSSC members meet with CIF and SAFER staff in order to discuss and plan recruitment strategies, so that everyone who may be involved or affected will be part of the planning process.

### **Delegation of Tasks**

In addition to recruitment, it was also suggested that the VSSC Coordinator could start delegating more work in the coming year so that she (and other Coalition members) do not become over-worked. Some tasks (such as contact with the libraries, meeting reminders, food for meetings) can easily be passed over to other members.

The topic of delegation also led to discussion of how the group could improve its communication at monthly meetings, so that group members update each other regarding workload, to prevent over-work of some members:

*“We need the group to be having these conversations, about sharing the workload, during the meetings.”*

It was suggested that a check-in about workload could be added as a part of each monthly meeting, in addition to the emotional check-in.

## **Conclusion**

In reflecting over its two years' work, the VSSC has discovered some important areas for potential growth in the future. Both the questionnaire and focus group asked about people's perceptions of the group's tasks (activities) and process (emotional support), and explored how these two elements are connected with each other and impact on the group's future.

As the Coalition works on its activities, members get to know each other and are now articulating a need to connect with each other emotionally ('process'), so that people are supported in this work. As well, they are able to speak more honestly now about sharing of workload and delegation of tasks. The balance of 'task' and 'process' functions can be challenging dynamics in any group: some people want more focus on the work; some people want to see more emotional support. The VSSC has wisely raised these potentially conflictual topics early in its life, in ways that are mutually respectful and productive. There is rich opportunity here for growth of all kinds!

On a practical note, the tasks of recruitment, prioritization of activities in the coming year, and change in SAFER's role are all external factors that will affect group dynamics. Coalition members may need to hold a strategic planning session early in its third year of existence, possibly facilitated by CIF and/or SAFER staff, to make plans and decisions regarding its next year's work. Some of the factors affecting each topic have been identified earlier in this report. Regarding recruitment, who will act as the point of contact, and how can recruitment be increased without overloading that person? Also, the issue of whether non-survivors be included in the VSSC came up in discussion, and such a change would require discussion with CIF regarding the VSSC mandate.

As the VSSC gains more confidence and visibility, it is inevitable that more opportunities for community outreach and education become apparent. Recruitment may not yield a large number of new members, so how does the

group choose its focus? Does it maintain its current work? Or choose different tasks for the year to come?

As well, the change in SAFER's role seems to have significant meaning for Coalition members. The change in this role will need to be openly discussed between group members and SAFER staff, and perhaps even some negotiation regarding SAFER's continued, though decreased presence at monthly meetings.

Finally, it is suggested that a strategic planning session should also include discussion of how to balance task and process functions at each meeting, and how to facilitate opportunities for members to share and connect, such as home-based meetings or social events.

As stated earlier, this is a rich opportunity for the VSSC to plan its next stage of growth. Such change need not be sudden or de-stabilizing for the group and its members. Instead, with careful planning and open discussion, as evidenced by this process, group members can support each other to move the group to its next plateau, ensuring group longevity as well as individual health.

## Appendix A

### Vancouver Suicide Survivors Coalition

#### Email Questionnaire

- 1) How many monthly meetings of the VSSC have you attended?
- 2) Do (did) you find the group meeting your expectations? Please explain.
  - Is the VSSC doing the kind of work-tasks you expected?
  - Is the VSSC providing the kind of emotional support you expected?
- 3) SAFER is reviewing its role in the VSSC. What kind of support *for the VSSC* have you found useful from SAFER?
- 4) What are some new directions or areas of focus the VSSC should look at?
- 5) What would be your interest and capacity in supporting this kind of work in the future?
- 6) Do you have any suggestions regarding how the VSSC could recruit more members?

## Appendix B

### Vancouver Suicide Survivors Coalition

#### Focus Group Questions

General Discussion, guided by the following headings:

#### 1. Expectations:

**The stated purpose of the VSSC is to:**

- Advance a suicide prevention agenda in greater Vancouver through education, advocacy & networking
- Reduce the stigma surrounding suicide
- Reduce the risks of suicide

How do people see the group meeting these tasks?

How do people see the group meeting their personal needs?

#### 2. SAFER's role:

In the past, SAFER has provided:

- Staff at monthly meetings
- Help with planning events
- Print materials and staff at VSSC-hosted events
- Referrals to VSSC

SAFER will be stepping back more this year, no longer having staff attend these meetings. What impact could this have on the VSSC?

#### 3. New Directions:

What are some new directions the VSSC could pursue in the year to come?

What are people's capacity/energy to pursue these new ideas?

## Appendix C

### Examples of partnership and assistance between VSSC and SAFER:

#### Examples of SAFER's contribution to VSSC:

- Organizational support and meeting space prior to CIF funding
- Mail distribution of information about forums
- Joint sponsorship and planning of VSSC public forums
- Support counselors at public forums
- Staff person at the monthly meetings to provide support
- Referral of potential new members to the VSSC, from SAFER's group and individual counseling services
- Periodic operational guidance
- Expertise and experience in field of suicide prevention

#### Examples of VSSC's contribution to SAFER:

- Increased visibility in the community regarding SAFER's services, via VSSC forums, library education projects, and distribution of SAFER brochures at these events and through personal networks
- Participation in SAFER's 2002 Strategic Planning session
- Referral of members of public to SAFER's services
- Opportunity for transformation of professional relationship with suicide survivors, from 'counsellor and client' to 'allies in suicide prevention'

## Appendix D



August 18, 2006

Dear Colleagues:

First of all we want to say how very much we appreciate the work that has been done to compile the information and prepare the report, 'Vancouver Suicide Survivors Coalition Community Engagement Consultation.' We are most grateful for the time and energy invested and also for the candor of responses. It was very important for us at SAFER to have a better sense of how our contributions to the VSSC are viewed as a basis for continuing a mutually beneficial collaborative relationship between our ever evolving organizations.

We certainly agree with the final conclusion in the report, which is the VSSC has a rich opportunity to plan its next stage of growth. SAFER is very committed to seeing the VSSC continue to grow and to establish itself as an autonomous and self-determining entity with whom SAFER can partner as an equal around shared goals. To us a part of the value of this review was to help us explore whether our involvement with the VSSC was still supportive of achieving this aim, as we have had some concerns about being perhaps more involved than is good for fostering development toward independence. What has been made clear is that SAFER remains a valuable source of emotional support, knowledge and consultation to the VSSC. It is also important to acknowledge that we have learned a lot - and still have much to learn - from the VSSC and that this is a real benefit to SAFER. Therefore we believe the next step is to sit down and discuss best ways for us to continue to work with the VSSC in a format that facilitates it's evolving autonomy and respects any limits in our capacity to be an effective resource. In that vein we will certainly consider attendance at monthly meetings if this remains the best option, however it may well be that there are better ways for us to work together and share knowledge. It would be useful to mutually explore these possibilities with the group as a part of the strategic planning session mentioned in the report.

A major concern identified in the report is that of recruitment. Certainly SAFER is prepared to do some brainstorming with the VSSC around this issue.

We do not believe however, that we necessarily have particular expertise here. Perhaps this might be an opportunity for the VSSC to seek consultation from other community groups engaged in the work of advocacy, public awareness and reduction of stigma. Such groups likely also deal with issues around recruitment and may have good ideas to share - examples of possible contributors might be the BC Schizophrenia Society, the Mood Disorders Association, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, etc. Following this train of thought perhaps developing some form of liaison with organizations besides SAFER (and the Vancouver Crisis Centre) might be a useful consideration for the VSSC. One thought is the creation of an Advisory Committee of sorts with SAFER as one member. Such a group could provide input on a recruitment strategy for the VSSC that would address establishing a more visible identity that includes its own point of contact, information materials, screening tool, volunteer orientation/training etc. We would be happy to be a part of the conversations around these topics but again we believe there are others whose advice would also be valuable, including other Survivor organizations.

Again thank you so much for engaging in this consultation and sharing the findings with us. We look forward to participating in the planning discussions for the VSSC's next stage of growth.

Best Regards,  
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