



The Ferns Peer Respite

Human Expertise –
Peer Run Respite
As Community



By: Kathie Mitchell

It's been talked about for a long time in Montgomery County - having a welcoming space to go when you're feeling distressed instead of a hospital or other medical facilities that focus more on your "problem" than on your human experience.

So why now? Jennifer Srolovitz, Research Specialist at FEST, said a Peer Respite was a much needed resource in the county that has shown positive results in other communities.

"Part of the problem is because the options available to us mostly fit within the medical model," said Srolovitz who is a member of the Peer Respite Council. "In this model, crisis—or the person in it—is 'A *Problem That Needs Fixing*' so all energy and resources are put into stopping the symptoms. Unfortunately, stopping the symptoms is not the same as making sense of the experience of anguish or chaos, and the sense-making process is integral to re-purposing the crisis into a catalyst of catharsis."

She added that in order to achieve this, different options are needed - a different approach such as a Peer Respite.

"Research shows that respite guests report "greater improvements in self-esteem, self-rated mental health symptoms, and social activity functioning," as well as "statistically significant improvements in healing, empowerment, and satisfaction."

(Source: <https://www.livelearninc.net/peer-respite>)

Peer respite is different from hospitalization or crisis residential services, and provides an alternative where distress is viewed through the lens of being a common human experience instead of pathology; guests find meaning and growth in the experience, Srolovitz said.

Council member Maureen Feeny-Byrnes said the group came together in 2017 to begin brainstorming what a Peer Respite would look like in the county. But the dream had been going on for more than a decade. The Council consists of people with lived experience, family members, mental health providers, county Health and Human Services staff, faith and nonprofit organizations, and interested community members.

“A small group of us met in my living room to discuss the possibility of this,” Feeny-Byrnes said. “We started by using the Peer Respite Handbook which is the bible for this project! It morphed into the amazing group of board members that we have today.” The Council describes a Peer Respite as a welcoming space for people who feel overwhelmed, to have time, space and relationships that support their self-determination, healing and growth. It is a community for learning, healing and growing, recognizing that distress is a common human experience. The Council recognizes that people are the experts on themselves. Guests stay for one to seven days in a home-like environment.

According to Council Member Berta Britz, the Peer Respite would be a place of and for mutual wellbeing - and a place of belonging.

“Our Peer Respite would a place of and for mutual wellbeing...a space where all people can meet as friends and be held in the gaze of mutual recognition, where each of us opens to see meaning and potential wholeness in fear and pain, and experiences an expansive connection that emerges beyond it,” Britz said. *“We all need to know that we belong. Our communities need us. We need our communities. A Peer Respite is a place to land mid-stride. It is a place to be held in the gaze of mutual recognition.”*

A key component of the Peer Respite is the staff who have learned new responses from their own crises and are ready to compassionately engage as equals with guests as the guests consider how they want their lives to be different. The Peer Respite will offer honest, caring, mutually responsible relationships.

The staff will be trained in Intentional Peer Support. **Intentional Peer Support is a way** of thinking about and inviting transformative relationships. Practitioners learn to use relationships to see things from new angles, develop greater awareness of personal and relational patterns, and support and challenge each other in trying new things. For more information about Intentional Peer Support, go to: <https://www.intentionalpeersupport.org/what-is-ips>

The Council developed a survey to ask individuals and families for feedback about a Peer Respite to help them create the service. Anyone interested in the survey can find it at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/WPCCBYD>.

The Council will also have a key part in the overall development and operations of the Peer Respite. Srolovitz said the Council is not an advisory board which only has authority to advise but will actually oversee the Peer Respite. The Council will work with its partner and fiduciary, Hopeworx, Inc., a peer-run organization that will provide administrative support. The Council is also partnering with Access Services who will provide a building in Schwenksville to house the Peer Respite.

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-Berta Britz