

Peer Warmline



After establishing a peer education program, or when reevaluating the potential initiatives of an existing peer education program, consider implementation of a student-ran warmline. This addendum to the Peer Education Framework will explain what a warmline is, its benefits, and how to implement one on your campus/within your program.

What is a Warmline?

Warmlines are designed to be safe spaces for individuals when they need someone to talk to, but are not in an emergency/crisis situation. Discussions are focused on resilience, safety planning, and informed choice. Warmlines are often staffed by peers who have lived experiences with mental health challenges or stressful situations. Calls are anonymous and confidential, so people feel safe to share their struggles without fear of

judgement, consequences, or institutionalization.

This is critical for marginalized communities that have been historically impacted by disproportionate use of force by law enforcement officers when experiencing mental health distress.



Besides being an open ear, warmline workers should have a directory of resources to suggest to callers if further assistance is needed (campus resources, support groups, physical/mental health services, and community resources)

What are the Unique Benefits?

Warmlines provide a space for people to “vent” about their feelings early on before the situation escalates into a crisis. Utilizing these resources can help prevent the need for emergency intervention in the future. Early intervention could prevent the situation from amounting to a mental health crisis. Preventing crisis situations reduces the stress on hotlines and emergency rooms, reducing unnecessary psychiatric hospitalizations. There are also benefits for the person in distress, since being admitted to the emergency room often causes trauma and greater distress.

Since warmlines are staffed by individuals who have shared experiences with those calling in, unique and reassuring insight can be offered. Warmlines serve those who are looking for relatability, connection, and validation for the way that they are feeling. This speaks to the benefits of peer-to-peer contact and the importance of sharing lived experiences when supporting well-being. Research shows that people feel less distressed and more empowered after contacting warmlines (warmline.org).

Being a staff member for the warmline also offers benefits. Working the hotline and sharing your story allows peers to use their voice for the good of others. In fact, many callers may want to join the warmline staff after receiving help.

What It Is and What It Isn't (in Comparison to a Hotline)

A **warmline** is different from a **crisis hotline**. Crisis hotlines (988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, Trevor Project, National Domestic Violence Hotline, etc.), such as these, are often 24/7 and designed for people to call in acute moments of distress to connect with trained professionals who can listen, offer support, and connect with appropriate resources. The topics covered on these hotlines vary in severity, but can cover things like suicide, domestic abuse, sexual assault, and human trafficking. These crisis situations require immediate attention, while warmlines are designed to offer assistance and conversation outside of emergency situations. Some topics that a warmline typically aids individuals with are:

- Adjusting to college life
- Academic concerns
- Relationships and sex
- Alcohol and drug usage
- Sexual and gender identity
- Finding help and support
- Just wanting to talk



How to Develop a Warmline on Your Campus

Application

An **application and rigorous training process** ensures that the students working the warmline are truly **committed to the initiative**. Applications should include why an individual wants to join and what a peer-to-peer relationship means to them. Applications can be open throughout the entire semester, due at the end. Training is to start at the beginning of the following semester and last through the term.

- If possible, implement the warmline staff training as a course for degree credit. Speak with a program director in the department you best see the course fitting into (Human Development, Education, Psychology, etc.).
- Include a proposal that outlines the learning outcomes and syllabus of the course.

Students must commit to at least two semesters of staffing in order to join the warmline. The first semester is when the training will take place and the second is when they will be staffing the warmline. Students must have availability during the weekends and evenings. Preferably, there would be enough staff to run the warmline 24/7, but that may not always be realistic. Consider starting with weekends and evenings or during time periods that classes are not in session because this covers time frames that university health/counseling resources may be closed and unavailable to students. You can also contact other local hotlines/warmlines in the areas and inquire about the hours they are available. Collaborating with an existing hotline/warmline will provide insight into the needs of the local community.

Training

Proper training is paramount to ensure that staff feels equipped to handle warmline calls. Not only should this training teach students how to offer peer-to-peer support, but it should highlight cultural competency. Topics to be covered in trainings include:

- Safety planning
- Community resources/ how to refer people
- What is a crisis call? At what point do we refer a caller to a resource more equipped for handling crisis situations (911, 988, etc.)
- Stigma reduction/bias awareness
- Risk/protective factors
- Any mandated reporting requirements

There are a variety of pre-existing training courses for mental health first aid workers.

Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) Training is an interactive virtual seminar for anyone in the world who is interested in wellness, recovery, and creating their own evidence-based Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP). In these interactive seminars, participants learn how to develop personal life and wellness goals as they engage in a mutual learning model with other peers. WRAP Seminar I is also available in person. Contact us or see below for more information.

- **Time:** Four 4.5-hour sessions, which includes breaks
- **Cost:** \$399, plus the cost of training materials (\$30-\$40)
- **Prerequisites:** None

Supervision

Staff supervision must be regular and frequent on a warmline. Monthly check-in meetings between staff and supervisors build up a collaborative community and ensure proper support. During these meetings, supervisors should learn the goals of each staff member during their time on the hotline and figure out how to best support these goals (ex. “I want to be a therapist”. How can we support this goal?)

Staff meetings may also be held monthly. Individuals can talk about difficult calls they have had and exchange ideas on how to better support the community. This group meeting time also allows for memory refreshing on training materials.

Team building activities create a culture of shared success. It is important that peers feel supported by their team so they can go out and support callers on the warmline.

Ethics/Guidelines

The Copeland Center for Wellness and Recovery has an article about the ethical guidelines to a peer-support warmline. The National Practice Guidelines for Peer Support highlights standards that should be at

the core of a peer support practice. This document also serves as a guide for the topics that should be covered in training and the standards that students must agree to when they start their time on the warmline.

Collaboration

Collaborating with other campus resources can increase the efficacy of your warmline. For example, working with the campus health center or counseling center could mean that funds are available for warmline. Offering part time employment could increase the amount of hours that students are able to commit to the warmline.

Working with other campus resources could also mean physical cohabitation. Operating out of the counseling center (or health/wellness center) not only gives the warmline a physical space, but support from certified mental health professionals. This relationship is important and improves the span of a warmline.

Make sure that your warmline is properly advertised to the student body. Make the phone number clearly accessible and frequently disseminated. Working with the university's marketing and communications division will increase your reach.

Workspace

Having a central location, like an office, can be of great benefit to the warmline. This allows for physical supervision meetings, collaboration with other warmline staff, and increased accountability for staff members. But there are also options that can forward calls to staff members' cellphones. By working with a communication company, the warmline's number can be logged into/out of from any personal cellphone. This method allows for increased flexibility.



Collecting Data

Collecting data during each call is important. This not only is for supervisors to review, but it can also be important if you are searching for increased funding. Funding sources may want to see the call volume that the hotline is experiencing.

Some things for staff members to collect after each call include:

- Who took the call?
- Date?
- Time duration?
- Survey of the call
 - Before the call did the caller understand rights, options, available resources?
 - After the call did the caller understand rights, options, available resources? Were they able to verbalize a plan?
- Reason for call?
- Resources referred to?

Resources

- [So You Want to Start a Peer-Run Warmline?](#) From the National Empowerment Center
- [Peer-Run Warmlines & Resources](#) from the National Empowerment Center
- [Peer-Run Warmlines](#) from the Copeland Center