

**Compeer: A Volunteer Community Support System for the Mentally Ill
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In 1973, when Bernice Skirboll, of Rochester, New York, was severely injured in an automobile accident, she made a promise to herself that, if she recovered, she would do something to make a difference in her community. The outcome of her recovery, and that promise, was a non-profit volunteer organization called Compeer. At first Compeer simply arranged friendship matches for long-term inpatients in state psychiatric hospitals. But, today's clients include anyone with a diagnosis of mental illness who has been referred to Compeer by a mental health professional and the Rochester program alone serves 1,100 friendship matches. In addition, over 4,600 more consumers are served by volunteers from all walks of life working through 119 Compeer affiliate agencies. These affiliates are located in 33 United States plus Canada and Australia and are linked together by and receive support from the International Affiliation of Compeer Programs, called simply the IACP, located in Rochester.

In the most common type of match, a one-to-one friendship match, community volunteers make at least a one year commitment to meet with their friend one hour a week. The match is very much a cooperative effort between Compeer, the volunteer, the therapist and the client. For example, before being matched with a friend, volunteers participate in a three hour training session to learn more about issues related to mental illness, relationship building, and the Compeer process. Then, before the match is finalized, the volunteer meets with client and therapist. After the match is made, volunteers receive a second training and, every month the client and volunteer together complete a progress report that is submitted to the therapist who uses the report as a guide in any ongoing therapy. Furthermore, throughout the life of the

friendship, Compeer staff give continued support to all participants in the match.

In addition to making these matches, Compeer provides another equally important service to the community. Through our volunteer recruitment program, we are talking to schools, corporations, churches and civic organizations, and so we are constantly educating the public and increasing their awareness and understanding of mental illness. And, of course, those who do volunteer and go through Compeer training become even more keenly aware of the truths regarding mental illness.

In 1993, I was privileged to be involved in the development of a Compeer affiliate, in Birmingham, Alabama, where I live and work. My interest and motivation were keen in those early days, just as they are today. I was eager to establish an organization that I believed would be a credit and service to our community. And today, seven years later, I am pleased to say that we are becoming a valuable local resource. But little did I realize, in 1993, the effort and frustration necessary to earn this kind of role in a community. Today I'd like to describe for you the evolution of Compeer of Birmingham for it is a typical story of what goes into this type of community venture.

In June of 1993, a small group of interested individuals met in my home to learn about Compeer and to evaluate community need for such a program. Enthusiasm was high and this group became a task force to identify resources and recruit other interested individuals.

We soon learned that composition of the board is critical and members must include, not only those interested in mental illness, but experienced fund-raisers and community leaders who can get the attention of influential allies. Almost one year later, in March 1994, we were able to put together an advisory board that included such individuals. In the coming years, this advisory

board would eventually become the governing Board of Directors and today five of the original advisors still serve as Directors.

There was much to do, however, before advisors could become directors, however, and, at times, it seemed that everything had to be accomplished all at once. First, a proposal must be submitted to the IACP. We also quickly enlisted the pro bono services of an attorney who would help us to establish tax status as a non-profit corporation so that donations would be tax deductible. Even in those early days it was important to have an operating budget. For example, a new Compeer affiliate must pay IACP a start-up fee of \$1,800, and then a \$500. annual membership fee to IACP. These fees give the affiliate the right to use the Compeer logo and materials. But, more importantly, IACP provides direction and support throughout the development stage and beyond, including an annual national conference where all Compeer affiliates meet for continuing education and sharing.

So, even as we prepared and filed the necessary documents for non-profit status, we were also soliciting donations from individuals and corporations. And then, once our non-profit status was established, we began to submit grant requests to local and national institutions. However, while donors will give limited funds for development, they prefer to give their money to a functioning agency. So, as all of these start-up tasks were addressed, we also began to recruit volunteers and contact therapists for future client referrals.

In the seven years since that first meeting, Compeer of Birmingham has encountered both success and frustration. But, each time we face and resolve some new frustration, we seem to move to a new and higher plateau of growth and development. For example, in the past year we lost our donated office space but quickly found space in a newer building at a better location.

Prior to that, over a period of less than two years. we hired and lost four Executive Directors, the only paid position in our organization. But, in the Spring of 1999, we were lucky enough to find the kind of Director that we've been looking for since we began and her energy has renewed our optimism about the future of Compeer in Birmingham.

All non-profit volunteer agencies deal with similar struggles. But, the stigma of mental illness presents Compeer with an additional hurdle to overcome. For decades, in many parts of the United States, large psychiatric hospitals insulated the public from contact with the mentally ill. Intimidated by society's fear and suspicion, people hid mental illness when it occurred within their own family. And, for those families fortunate enough not to meet mental illness face to face, all they knew might come from the media when it reported some violent act committed by an individual identified by their mental illness, and little else. Thus, the fear of mental illness hampers volunteer recruitment. But, even here we're making progress and, as of March 1, we have 17 active matches. We hope that that is the beginning of a trend for, since the start of the year, we've developed and distributed a new informational brochure and we now have our own web-site. Our optimism has fed our efforts and engendered an even greater optimism.

Is it all worth it? Does Compeer, in fact, make a difference in a community? In 1997, IACP sent a survey to 119 IACP affiliates. One hundred and four responded and these evaluations indicate that Compeer does indeed make a difference. Let me share with you some highlights from that report:

- 3,597 Compeer volunteers, associated with the 104 respondents, served 5,750 clients
- over 90% of therapists, volunteers and clients reported satisfaction with both the friendship match and the organization in general

- there were consistent reports of improved family and social relationships, initiation of vocational and educational goals, and improvement in areas such as self-esteem, communication and independence

The mentally ill and the community in general obviously benefit from these kinds of outcomes. But, in addition, there are cost benefits associated with Compeer. In the United States, psychiatric hospitalization for a single individual can cost as much as \$200,000 a year, yet the average cost of a Compeer friendship is only \$1,240 a year. In addition, Compeer friendships have been associated with a decrease in psychiatric hospitalizations and the use of emergency services, and an increase in compliance with treatment plans and medications.

In the United States, historical circumstances created, for too many people, a fear of mental illness. Geel was fortunate that 700 years ago circumstances caused this community to develop an easy and natural acceptance of mental illness and created what has been called the “spirit of Geel.” But, it is my conviction that the “spirit of Geel” represents the best that can exist in all of mankind. I believe that spirit can exist at any time and in any place, and I am convinced that, just as it has in Geel, that spirit has found life in the birth and continued growth of Compeer. The word “compeer” literally means an equal, a peer, a comrade. As members of the international community, living with the realities of mental illness, Geel and Compeer are truly compeers.