

Perspective of volunteer staff on the effectiveness of peer-support programs: a case study

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore perceived effectiveness in the Warriors' Ascent program through interviews of volunteer staff, to leverage improvements in the design and delivery of programs through peer-volunteers.

Design/methodology/approach – Focused interviews were conducted to explore peer-volunteer perspectives on program effectiveness. The alignment of themes and statements emerging from interviews was explored in detail relative to the program curriculum.

Findings – Five main themes emerged, with alignment for 86% of the peer-volunteers' commentary and program curriculum. Areas of non-alignment may present opportunities for program growth.

Practical implications – Analysis of peer-volunteer perspectives on practical activities and overall program effectiveness identified options to enhance program delivery. Warriors' Ascent and both existing and emerging organizations (such as those who will serve distressed frontline pandemic workers) are essential social resources poised to evolve by encompassing appreciation and more effective use of non-professional volunteer support staff.

Originality/value – Peer-volunteers supporting behavior change programs are an emerging focus for research. Peer-volunteers contribute unique perspectives, common experiences and building of relations with a program's participants serving as an effective agent of change contributing toward healthier lifestyles. Considering the influences of peer-volunteers during program evaluation allows triangulation among sources of information and offers additional opportunities for influencing program growth.

Keywords Mental health, Program evaluation, Behavior change, Military veterans, Post-traumatic stress, Peer-support, Volunteer staff perspective

Paper type Research paper

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Background

This study explored the perceived effectiveness of a behavior-change program having a peer-support model, using interviews with volunteer staff to consider approaches to enhance the design and implementation of peer-support programs staffed by volunteers.

Military veterans seek help with trauma-related symptoms as they transition into homes and communities (Olenick *et al.*, 2015). Many community programs addressing trauma include peer-volunteers, who provide support to others with whom they share challenging life experiences (Repper and Carter, 2011). Participants experience trust, personal growth, change, reciprocity and hope with peer-volunteers (King and Simmons, 2018). Military veterans are drawn to such programs as alternates to formal mental health services (Drebing *et al.*, 2018), valuing shared experiences, relationship building and growing together as a cohort (Drebing *et al.*, 2018). Peer-volunteers have a perspective on program services and key roles guiding and modeling the application of curricular principles.

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Understanding program effectiveness is important not only in providing services but also for marketing and seeking funding for programs (Bach-Mortensen *et al.*, 2018; Pew Charitable Trusts, 2021; Smith and Phillips, 2016). Participant perceptions obtained immediately upon conclusion of a program predominate evaluations (Chinman *et al.*, 2014), omitting peer-volunteers' perspectives on efficacy (Ormel and VonKorff, 2021). Although the importance of dynamic interactions among participants and peer-volunteers is discussed (Watson, 2019), capturing these interactions often is overlooked (Gillard *et al.*, 2017) and relying upon peer-volunteers to provide programming can be a concern (Schlichthorst *et al.*, 2020). Active participation of peer-volunteers in program activities is an opportunity to integrate their perspectives and skills, providing insight regarding the effectiveness of volunteer support and alignment of outcomes with the program goals.

Measuring program efficacy

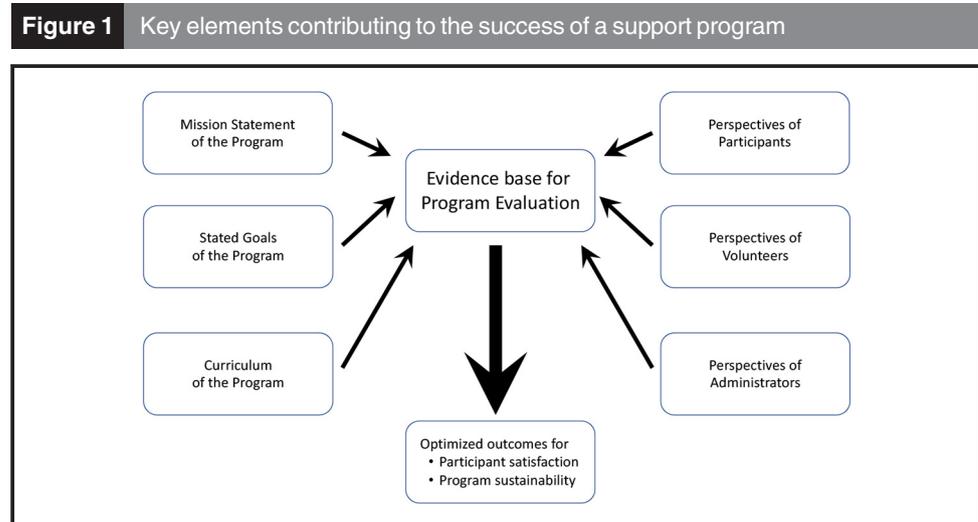
Formal program elements provide structure, guide the program's training and evaluation process and strengthen rigor and reliability of outcome evaluations (Gillard *et al.*, 2017), although this same study states program evaluation without considering unique features of the target population weakens evaluation validity.

Figure 1 illustrates relations among program elements explored by considering mission statements, goals, curriculum and input from volunteer staff, participants and administrators. Insights about the interaction of features can emerge, with coherent alignment providing participants with an understanding of goals and services (Leuthesser and Kohli, 1997).

Warriors' Ascent program

Warriors' Ascent is a 501(c)(3) organization in Kansas City, MO providing peer-support to military veterans and first responders in crisis. This program was developed and is facilitated by military veterans to address symptoms related to post-traumatic stress (PTS), suicidal ideation and relationship stressors. Retreats are staffed by two paid staff, three contract staff and a changing group of peer-volunteers. This study restricts the focus to the peer-volunteers' perspective of the military veterans participating in Warriors' Ascent retreats (rather than first responder participants or non-volunteer staff).

Cohorts for Warriors' Ascent programs historically have a 2:1 ratio of military veterans to first responders, with approximately 400 participants served since the program inception in 2015.



We here focus on the peer-volunteer's perspective on meeting military veterans' needs, considering outcomes for this local program as they may apply to behavior change programs more generally. We also explore the peer-volunteers' perspectives about the potential for these veterans to retain and use skills taught by the Warriors' Ascent program after the retreat ends and they return to their everyday environments.

The Warriors' Ascent program is a no-cost, immersive 5 day/4-night retreat. A single-sex cohort of 10–15 men or women is guided through educational, experiential and cognitive exercises to “support healing the mind, body and soul” (Warriors' Ascent, 2021). Staff and peer-volunteers assist cohort members in practicing healthy habits, developing self-awareness and reframing thoughts and behaviors to promote personal health and relationships. Cohort members work individually and in groups with peer-volunteers, with goal setting and experience journaled in detail daily (Table 1).

Method

Research design

Two peer-volunteers from the Warriors' Ascent program took part in independent interviews (six peer-volunteers were invited to participate in this study). A Warriors' Ascent administrator screened peer-volunteers for inclusion; all were at least 18 years old and had volunteered at least once with Warriors' Ascent. One to two recorded telephone interviews were conducted for each participant. Initial interviews of 30–60 min were followed 3–4 weeks later by a brief interview (<30 min) to verify details emerging from the analysis of the initial interview. The study was conducted with Institutional Review Board approval (#00144843) and after the study participants gave informed consent.

Study participants

Study Participant #1. Study Participant #1 is a 40-year-old married Caucasian woman who previously worked as a Life Flight dispatcher and a 911 dispatch officer; her husband had attended a Warriors' Ascent retreat to address trauma-related being a first responder. The couple attended a Warriors' Ascent refresher course designed for couples, where she learned skills to cope with stress and how to support her husband. She has volunteered at more than ten Warriors' Ascent retreats between 2018–2020, supporting both male and female cohorts. She helps Warriors' Ascent coordinate program logistics, communicating with potential cohort members and has assisted in guiding cohort members through the curriculum.

Study Participant #2. Study Participant #2 is a 47-year-old divorced Caucasian man working as a paid firefighter, who initially participated in the Warriors' Ascent program to address trauma-related to his experience in the Army. He was recruited to assist as a peer-volunteer through the Warriors' Ascent Facebook page two months after completing the program himself. His responsibilities are guiding cohort members through the curriculum, assisting in the kitchen and setting up obstacle courses.

Table 1 Guiding principles of the Warriors' Ascent program

Mission statement	To give our service members and first responders, who are in PTS-related psychological and emotional pain, the tools they need to heal themselves using a holistic approach
Stated goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To stop/reduce veteran and first responder suicide and depression by empowering them to take ownership of their own healing ● To give program participants the tools needed to heal and tend the mind, body and soul

Interviews

Initial interviews. A focused interview explored each of these peer-volunteer's perspectives about experiences by veterans during Warriors' Ascent retreats. Study Participants #1 and #2 were guided to address six areas of insight as follows: general concerns veterans brought to the start of a retreat; concerns related to enjoying everyday activities; the Warriors' Ascent strategies used most effectively after returning to home and community; the likelihood veterans will continue to use these strategies; barriers to using these strategies; and options for addressing barriers. As the initial interview progressed, additional clarification was sought as needed. Warriors' Ascent cohorts consist of military veterans and first responders, so study participants were reminded to confine insights to military veterans specifically. Interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed, coding applied and transcriptions deidentified, with all study-related documentation stored in a secure location to protect privacy.

Follow-up interviews. A second interview took place within one month, for member-checking of themes and to seek clarification about volunteer training prior to retreats.

Trustworthiness and reliability

Investigators studied Warriors' Ascent's curriculum, handbooks and other documentation. Initial interviews were transcribed and explored using qualitative content analysis (Erlingsson and Brysiewicz, 2017; Kohlbacher, 2006). Reviewers read transcripts iteratively, with responses color-coded by topic and recorded in a spreadsheet. Data were cleansed by aligning notations of conversation fillers, inaudible sections and emotional content (MacLean *et al.*, 2004). Reviewers compared transcriptions to achieve >70% transcription consensus overall (Kovacs and Hill, 2015). Care was taken to review coded responses alongside transcriptions regularly for continued alignment. Interpretations and themes were compared to achieve a >90% consensus and to eliminate biases (McHugh, 2012). Key statements and themes emerging from interviews were compared with the curriculum as presented in the Warriors' Ascent organization's handbook.

Results

Five categories of qualitative data emerged, namely, relationship concerns, early transformations, skill translation to home/community, embracing vulnerability and program content anticipating potential barriers. Findings were contextualized by alignment with Warriors' Ascent principals and curriculum (Table 2).

Table 2 Summary of alignment for peer-volunteer perspectives with Warriors' Ascent programming

Warriors' Ascent material	Participant #1	Participant #2
1. Mission statement	✓	✓
2. Goals	✓	✓
3. Curriculum		
a. Philosophy on how trauma impacts mind, body and soul	✓	Unclear
b. Purpose and practice of mindfulness	Unclear	Unclear
c. Development and understanding of emotionally supportive relationships	✓	✓
d. Healthy lifestyle practice	✓	✓
4. Strategies		
a. Meditating	✓	✓
b. Journaling	✓	✓
c. Mindfulness	✓	✓
d. Yoga	✓	✓
e. Diet	✓	✓

Alignment of volunteer dialog with program materials

A detailed comparison of interview data with Warrior's Ascent materials was conducted. Alignment was identified for 86% of this information and is discussed in the following section titled *curricular elements*; instances that did not seem to align were identified as *unclear*. Some elements meaningful for program operations arose separately from the curriculum; these are discussed in the *operational elements* section.

Curricular elements of Warriors' Ascent program

Relationship concerns. Both study participants identified relationship challenges as the main concern of veterans in Warriors' Ascent programs, citing statements about interactions with family and community members being complicated by PTS symptoms. The program curriculum identifies features of healthy relationships, and focuses on understanding and developing emotionally supportive relationships (Warriors' Ascent, 2021). Cohort members are educated on how trauma can impact the perception of interpersonal interactions and are taught mindfulness exercises to ground themselves in the present and to be less reactive to surroundings:

One of the most frequent answers is their relationship is suffering due to the PTSD and they isolate themselves [...] push away the people that care [...] they want to learn how to fix those relationships. They struggle with having the desire or ability to function in everyday normal life [...] doing the smallest thing interacting with their family, being out amongst people in public is hard for them due to the hypervigilance or anxiety. (Study Participant #1)

One [veteran and] his wife were starting to get [a divorce]. he really didn't want to [...] he wasn't sure what was going on [...] everybody has relationship issues but I think that's what most of [...] their problems were [...] letting go of the other stuff [...]. (Study Participant #2)

Early transformations. Both study participants observed changes in overt behavior as veterans became more relaxed during the initial day of a retreat, manifested as more relaxed posture, deeper breathing and less guarded facial expressions. Study participants linked "enjoying everyday activities" (Warriors' Ascent 2021) to a cohort member's emerging understanding of the interrelation of awareness, understanding, relaxing and enjoying, reinforced throughout the retreat by teaching concepts related to healing the mind, of mindfulness and of vulnerability (Figure 2):

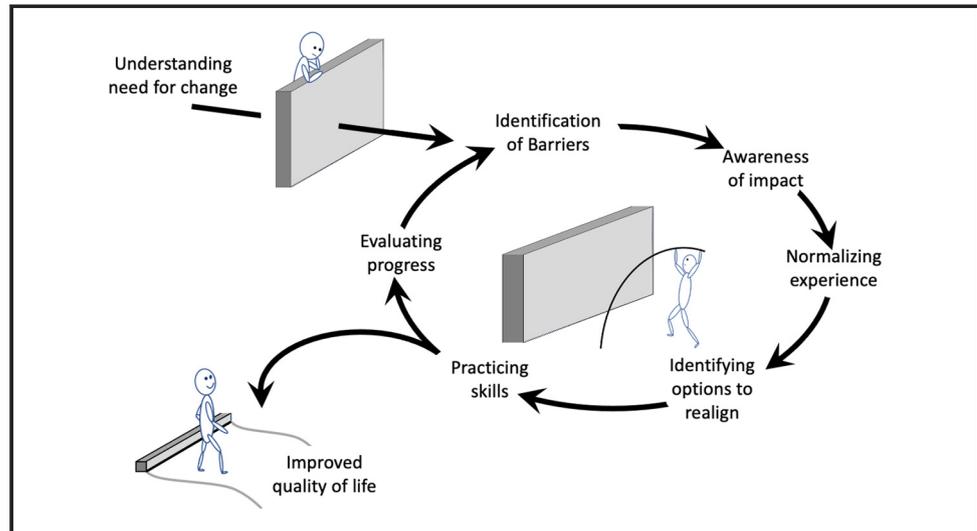
The individuals that walk in before the classes start are not the same people that walk out [...] it's literally like looking at a different person [...] relaxed. [...] like stone, no facial expression [...] hardly see them breathing because they are so tense [...] anxious and uncertain of what they are about to endure [...] as soon as the next day, they [...] relax [...] maybe even some smiles and there's been some bonding [...] been able to let down their guard [...] show some emotion [...] it's just a huge difference. (Study Participant #1)

[...] they [new cohort members] weren't real sure about it at first [...] got there and people were shy, on their guard [...] a couple of days then they're more aware of everything [...] started to enjoy [...] relaxing [...] (Study Participant #2)

Skill translation to home/community. An essential need identified by volunteers following a veteran's completion of a Warriors' Ascent retreat is a good support system. Study Participant #2 believes attitudes toward mental health influence the experience of healing, stating cohort members reported challenges using new strategies when not encouraged or valued by their supports. Identification and practice of supportive, affirming relationships is a key element of the program's curriculum, integral to healthy lifestyles and preparing cohort members to continue healing after return to homes and communities:

Roadblocks will be self-initiated [...] and maybe they need to try another tool to get around that [...] It's hard being a spouse of someone that is suffering [...] not understanding [...] It's harder

Figure 2 Peer-volunteer staff report an observable evolution of awareness and understanding for interactions



for them [veterans without a good support system] to move forward in their healing [...] Being closed off, not sharing is probably the biggest thing [...]. (Study Participant #1)

Peers at their job harassing [the veteran] [...] doing coping skills [...] attacking their coping skills you're attacking [the veteran] too [...] the guys sit around and laugh about it, after a while he's not relaxing and doing it much [...]. (Study Participant #2)

Embracing vulnerability. Embracing challenges were identified as a key factor in surmounting problems, particularly when veterans are encouraged as they process adaptive responses; this also is an opportunity for social engagement. Our study participants discussed the curriculum in the context of relationships being influenced by the acceptance of vulnerability, and how sharing of feelings is central to bonding among cohort members. Reflecting on his prior experience as a cohort member, Study Participant #2 described his new awareness about choices when feeling vulnerable at work; choosing to accept an uncomfortable status quo or self-advocating and engaging his coworkers to create an effective support system. Accepting vulnerability and its relation to trust building was emphasized as an important curricular element:

I think it all boils down to vulnerability [...] going into the program [...] the anticipation of being there [...] once they get there if they can relax and be a little vulnerable [...] other people like me I can relate to these other people I'm sitting here with. You know I think a lot of times they don't think there's truly people that have been in their shoes and tried to see where they are coming from [...] they start to let themselves be a little more vulnerable and that's when the shift [happens]. (Study Participant #1)

[I could] get used to it [being made fun of] or talk to them, tell them [...]. I don't want you to mock me because I don't mock you. (Study Participant #2)

Operational elements of Warriors' Ascent program

Program content and anticipating potential barriers. Both study participants recounted strategies taught during retreats, identifying those used by cohort members regularly. They emphasized strategies are used when they are viewed as practical and make sense.

Although the Warriors' Ascent curriculum promotes positive support systems for long-term strategy use, teaching strategies is done in the controlled retreat environment and translating the strategies into the community after the program ends may be difficult for cohort members without prior guidance on approaches to unanticipated barriers:

[...] tending to the mind, body, and soul. They learn meditation, journaling, mindfulness, yoga, and diet. They talk about how diet affects your psyche, if you're not eating healthy. (Study Participant #1)

For myself (as a cohort member) it was the meditation and journaling. [...] you learn, what you do and what's going to heal and benefit you, you are going to stick to it. (Study Participant #2)

Conclusions

This study explored the effectiveness of a behavior change program from the perspective of volunteer staff providing peer-support during program activities. Insights gained from these peer-volunteers and the program's stated philosophy and goals provided a basis for understanding sources of program effectiveness and the practical application of this curriculum. A heterogeneous scope of background knowledge and approaches to program elements emerged as volunteer staff described their observations. Familiarity with program philosophy, goals and face value of the curriculum were most common. Absent were a deeper, standardized and more consistently delivered training prior to volunteers participating in program activities and both knowledge about and application of self-engagement as a tool in the therapeutic process. Also, absent during retreats was teaching problem-solving, focused on addressing barriers interfering with a cohort member implementing strategies post-program. These instances of less clear alignment of volunteer perspective with program goals suggest opportunities for enhanced curriculum delivery and may be appropriate for consideration as addressable factors by other similar programs.

Volunteer training

The training of volunteers prior to participating in Warrior's Ascent activities emerged as a prime addressable goal for this organization. A peer-volunteer is central to implementing a curriculum and can serve as an effective agent of change (Chambers *et al.*, 2013). Gillard *et al.* (2017) articulate five principles effective in guiding volunteer training to align with a program's goals and with outcomes desired by cohort members. Table 3 illustrates how Warriors' Ascent or other similar programs may incorporate these five principles into the training of volunteers to support the practical application of the curriculum.

The Warriors' Ascent organization values experience shared by cohort members and peer-volunteers, although conscious use-of-self is not promoted explicitly as a training technique for program staff participating in exercises themselves. Full implementation of a peer-support model is a relatively new approach for many programs with as-yet unexplored features (Milliard, 2020). Similar to other programs focused on behavioral change, the Warriors' Ascent organization is challenged by limited resources and philanthropic funding. The benefit of diverting limited resources toward developing the volunteer role as a curricular tool must be weighed carefully. Additional sources to consider for external support and resources may include grants or awards aimed at program improvement, *pro bono* consultant services or alignment with academic entities providing teaching or research opportunities (EVALNETWORK, 2020; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2021).

Including volunteer input in strategies for evaluating program effectiveness is supported by our findings and by prior literature (Heisler, 2010), yet using this input source is not widespread. In addition to resource constraints, the limited implementation may stem from underestimating the value of a volunteer's perspective

Table 3 Suggested volunteer training strategies to enriching the role of the volunteer into the therapeutic process during the Warriors' Ascent retreat

<i>Principles of volunteer training (Gillard et al., 2017)</i>	<i>Proposed modifications to program delivery</i>	<i>Opportunities during the retreat for implementing change</i>
1. Support building safe and trusting relationships among peers with cohorts	Peer-volunteers train to model supportive emotional relationships and active listening (Flickinger, 1992; Schilling, 2012)	Peer-volunteers engage with cohort members upon arrival for retreat and guide them through agenda; engage those appearing withdrawn or less involved in activities
2. Ensure values of mutuality and reciprocity underpin the relationship of peers with cohorts	Peer-volunteers recognize the value in sharing stories and conscious use-of-self in learning, teaching and supporting activities (Gillard, 2019; Watson, 2019)	Peer-volunteers share what brought them to Warriors' Ascent initially and later as a volunteer
3. Promote validation and application of personal experience in the provision of peer support to cohorts	Peer-volunteers reflect on personal experience transition to home and community transitions. What new insights did they have? What would they do differently?	Peer-volunteers discuss barriers they encountered and navigated using strategies taught in the curriculum
4. Enable peers to exercise leadership and choice and provide input in how peers provide support to cohorts	Peer-volunteers assist in the development of Warriors' Ascent volunteer training; observing participants in their transformations and modeling mindfulness (Drinko, 2020)	Peer-volunteers assist cohort members to identify healthy behaviors and to interpret personal experiences using elements drawn from the curriculum
5. Empower peers to explore and apply personal strengths and awareness of community contributions	Peer-volunteers taught to explore how volunteering contributes to personal insight, peers and community (Gillard, 2019; Watson, 2019)	Peer-volunteers reflect on personal growth, insights and giving back to the community

Note: Content modified from Gillard et al. (2017) for application to the Warriors' Ascent curriculum

when operating in an environment staffed primarily by professional experts (Eaton et al., 2019; Gillard, 2019). Liability, high staff turnover and attrition are common concerns for behavior support services and may limit the exploration and development of the peer-volunteer role (Hebert et al., 2008; Naslund et al., 2021). Our findings suggest addressing these concerns proactively with a strategic and consistent approach to training peer volunteers may be worth the time and effort invested.

There are some parallels with Warrior's Ascent and other well-known organizations. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) emphasizes the value of lived experience by non-professional peers, with AA members relying on shared experiences, bonding and establishing trusting relationships to support managing and maintaining sobriety (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2021). Similarly, our study participants emphasized the importance of a military veteran's ability to *embrace vulnerability* for successful sharing and bonding. Warriors' Ascent was developed and operated by veterans familiar with military culture, who recognized the personal and social needs shared in common by participants during the earliest programs offered and study participants reported these features as part of the present program curriculum. Despite empirical evidence being important for addressing expectations of funding agencies and other potential donors (Bach-Mortensen et al., 2018), programming based on a non-professional peer-led volunteer staff still may represent a concern. This concern could be allayed by establishing a robust and consistent training program for all staff participating in program activities. Adoption of an approach incorporating volunteer input by any program having an expert-based emphasis will require a shift in philosophy and negotiation to establish a platform where non-professional perspectives are sought, included and valued (Mitchell, 2013). Further inquiry and exploration of Warriors' Ascent, AA and many other organizations are warranted, to provide guidance as behavior support programs evolve to use models affording a greater appreciation and effective use of the insights trained non-professional support staff offer.

Gender differences

Our study participants suggest gender should be considered as a factor in a program's framework, to account for cohort composition. Warriors' Ascent programs are conducted with separate cohorts for male or female participants. The gender ratio of a cohort may shape interactions related to camaraderie, disclosure of trauma and problem-solving strategies. Tailoring content to consider gender-specific factors may be more effective for single gender cohorts and while other gender-related factors may be more relevant in gender-mixed cohorts. Such elements are important in the context of exploring gender-discrimination or sexual trauma ([US Department of Veterans Affairs, V.H.A, 2020](#)), where prior experience(s) may define interpersonal dynamics when traumatized cohort members interact with volunteers sharing gender identity with perpetrators of the trauma ([Monteith et al., 2020](#)).

General extrapolations

There is value to considering the implications of our findings by organizations focused on serving other groups. Organizations serving children often use volunteer staff and value the children's input when evaluating program effectiveness. Surveying minors may, however, raise reliability and confidentiality concerns ([Society for Research in Child Development, 2008](#)). The framework we have outlined offers an alternate, incorporating volunteer perspectives to explore insights and observations of those individuals working most closely with the children served by organizations as Boys and Girls Club, Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) and Young Men's Christian Association ([Boys and Girls Club of America, 2021](#); [National CASA/GAL, 2021](#); [Young Men's Christian Association, 2021](#)).

This approach also has value in anticipating preventative and support services needed to address the impact on health care professionals' mental health in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic ([Chatzittofis et al., 2021](#)). A greater appreciation and more effective use of perspectives offered by peer-support groups may benefit future programs serving pandemic workers coping with depression and PTS, especially those groups having heterogeneity in work history and experience.

Unique perspectives are provided by Study Participant #1 and Study Participant #2 who possess distinct differences in gender and demographics, experiences as peer-volunteers at Warriors' Ascent. Although different, these characteristics are important to consider because they occur in all populations and they illustrate the importance of looking at all of the members' understandings in a cohort. Individualized experiences at Warriors' Ascent similar to individualized treatment yield variable outcomes and suggest a maintained contact between Warriors' Ascent staff and each cohort member following their completion of the program to assist them with maintaining and achieving their behavior change goals.

The level of insight Study Participant #1 provides may be contributable to their wide-ranging participation in Warriors' Ascent retreats, as well as their ability to reflect on and distinguish their observations as a peer-support versus as the wife of a former participant. Study Participant #2 seems to present their previous personal experiences as a participant at Warriors' Ascent when asked for their observations of the other cohorts. This suggests the challenge of separating personal experiences from those of others when the information and learning are still new and fresh with little time to practice and reflect. In addition, this suggests with more time, training and experience as a peer-support, Study Participant #2 can acquire a more refined understanding of themselves and how their personal experience can help others ([Gitterman and Heller, 2011](#)).

Limitations

Study participation was voluntary, and subjects were informed of study goals before participating. Selection bias for participants comfortable with interviewing is possible, excluding less forthcoming candidates who may have contributed alternate perspectives. A focused interview format placed some constraints on conversation, possibly resulting in unclear conclusions when considering the alignment of interview dialogue and Warriors' Ascent curriculum. An inability to dissociate observations about others from personal experiences weakens the validity of interview data that may be addressed by a greater separation in time between participation in a cohort and volunteering in a program or between volunteering and being interviewed.

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Further reading

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