

Forming Men's Groups in Residential Care Facilities





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Stages Involved In Forming A Group



The partnership between the care facility and TOMNET is developed in three stages.

Stage One: Preliminaries

An intention to investigate commencing an older men's group at any residential care facility must first take into account the unique environment in which care facilities operate.

Bound by rigorous standards and legislation, these facilities must balance the individual and specific needs of their residents against the broader organisational needs of the facility itself. In order to operate, the facility must fulfil a significant number of legal, government and health and safety requirements, making the decision to introduce a new group from outside the organisation, not as simple as it might first appear.

Therefore gaining an understanding of the environment in which the care facility operates is important. You may need to consider:

- The community in which the facility operates – are there many facilities in the area or only one or two? The fewer facilities the more likely that staff may be under pressure to manage a wide range of health needs in residents and they may fear the additional workload that an extra group could bring. Conversely they may be grateful that volunteers have come into the facility to engage with residents that they do not have the time to speak with for any length of time.
- The organisational environment – is the facility a well-established and well respected entity? Can you be assured of a professional approach towards your volunteers from management and staff?
- The staff – will staff be given time within their working day to assist your volunteers to pick up residents and take them to the group, or are they expected to do this in their own time? The more onerous the responsibility on the staff to assist, the less likely it is that they will support the additional workload.
- The residents – are there sufficient older men in the facility to make the group worthwhile? Setting a minimum number for a group helps the volunteers feel that their time is being used productively. Staff may agree that the group is worthwhile if it engages a number of their older male residents rather than just two or three.

Once you have undertaken some preliminary investigation into the likelihood that the facility may be interested in your proposal for a support group it is time to make appointments with the key decision makers.

The first meeting

Before attending this meeting, take with you:

- Relevant brochures about your organisation if you are operating as part of, or being supported by one. These brochures should explain the organisation's philosophy, culture, mission and activities so that the care facility can see who it will be engaging with.
- A Service User Charter to describe how your organisation upholds the rights of older men and the responsibilities you take in working with them.
- A draft partnership agreement such as a memorandum of understanding. If you want the relationship to be successful, document each party's rights and responsibilities in getting the men's group off the ground and supporting it into the future to avoid disagreements and confusion down the track. A plain-speaking written agreement will make it clear to everyone what assistance is being offered and for how long. It may also include a clause about when to review the partnership and under what circumstances it might end.

It is important to establish in the minds of the staff of the care facility that your volunteers will have allocated tasks and responsibilities and that any equipment, venue or time that is offered will be managed appropriately.

- Describe any physical support that is being offered to the older men's group by the care facility or by your organisation.
- The roles and responsibilities of your organisation to manage the group, review the success of the group and report on progress.
- The roles and responsibilities of the care facility to manage the group, review the success of the group and report on progress of the residents.

During the interview with the key decision maker, make sure you gain an understanding of the facility's policies and procedures. You also need to be comfortable with the organisation's physical, social and emotional environment as you are putting volunteers into it with the intention that it will be ongoing. Some volunteers may only want to assist for a limited period of time so a twelve month commitment is a good starting point.

Leave a draft partnership agreement with the care facility for them to review in detail and ask them to make any suggestions in relation to the content to ensure that they have fully committed to the group.

What does a partnership agreement look like?

At its simplest, a partnership agreement could be a letter which outlines:

- A short explanation of the purpose of the older men's group and what it hopes to achieve.
- An outline of the key roles and responsibilities of the volunteers of the older men's group and the staff of the care facility, for example
 - * who coordinates the group
 - * who is the key contact within the care facility
 - * where the group will be held and how often
 - * how many staff and volunteers will be attending the group
 - * who will promote the group
 - * who will transport residents if this is required
 - * who is providing refreshments

When you are both satisfied with the contents, print off a final version and have both decision-makers sign and date it. Each party retains a copy.

For a sample partnership agreement see Appendix 5.

The follow-up meeting

If there is interest in pursuing the idea of a support group, suggest that you meet with care staff to exchange information about the proposed group, encourage their questions and debate, discuss plans for how it might operate and receive their input and cooperation in the planning of it. The more commitment you gain from staff now, the more likely it is that you will find them happy to work with you as the group progresses.

If there is agreement that the group can proceed, promote the men's group within the facility through word of mouth, newsletters, notices and brochures. With the facility's permission you may take some volunteers and doorknock the residences where older men live to introduce yourself and leave a brochure about the group.

"A lot of blokes can't get out, they're pretty lonely and don't get visitors so maybe my visits can be of help. I enjoy what I do."

Lindsay

Stage Two: Engaging the Men

Congratulations! Your group for older men has been approved and your volunteers are eager to start identifying men who may find the group a useful support and a source of mateship and interaction.

- If you have not already done so, ask the facility for a list of male residents including those in independent living units associated with the facility. The men do not have to be living alone; many spouses will appreciate that their male partner has found a new social group to interact with.
- Create a team of volunteers to make initial visits to men of the facility and promote the group. Residents will be curious to know when and where the group will be held, what it might involve and what the expectation is on them when they attend. As many older men find it difficult to trust new social engagements, particularly when hosted by men that they don't know, it can be easier for them to refuse an invitation rather than face their fear of the unknown. The more information you can provide in a leaflet or face to face, the more comfortable the older man will become with the idea. A sample letter of invitation can be found at Appendix One.
- During the visit, personally invite the older man to attend an information/meet and greet gathering to gauge the level of interest in attending the first men's meeting. However don't rush or pressure a decision. Leave the offer open with a friendly smile and remember that many older people take some time to make a firm decision about trying something new.
- At the initial meet and greet gathering, reiterate information about your organisation and the purpose of the partnership between the facility men and the volunteers. Ask for questions and talk about any other groups you have seen like this and some of the things that happened within them. Whilst not every detail needs to be nailed down, many men will want reassurance that you have some sort of plan for the time that you are all together.
- With those men who are interested, hold a 'round table' discussion where facility men and the volunteers share ideas about the content and processes of the meetings in general. Details such as time, location, duration, frequency and format of the meetings should be determined to put some certainty and planning into the process.
- Appoint a team of volunteers who agree to consistently meet with the facility's men's group for a period of twelve months after which their involvement may be reviewed with a possible change in volunteers. One older resident had a clear reply to the question of what is the worst thing that TOMNET could do to the group when he said, 'Don't turn up!' The need for consistency and certainty is very important to older men who come to rely on the friendship and camaraderie that eventuates from these meetings. To have a volunteer 'mate' not turn up when the resident has trusted that he will be there is highly disappointing for the resident and potentially doing more harm than good.

- Ensure that the partnership agreement specifies whether your volunteers will supply refreshment or the facility will. Having something to eat with a tea or coffee helps to relax residents and make the meetings more of a social occasion.
- Keep attendance registers and any other noteworthy information by recording each meeting in an exercise book or folder. Remember that you should be reporting to your own organisation and/or the facility anything that is of personal concern to a volunteer in relation to the physical, social or emotional state of the resident. You also may want to follow up those residents who miss a meeting to ensure that nothing has happened to disturb or upset them and they do not need some sort of additional support.

“Just getting together is good. It means having a talk – men’s talk. It is a chance to connect with other blokes and get away from the wife for a while”. Alan

As with any support group where there is an opportunity to talk to others about common concerns, be they emotional, physical, social or a combination of these, some men can find it quite overwhelming after everyone goes back home. Therefore having volunteers and facility staff who are alert for the crises that can occur when older men become aware of their deeply buried worries or past hurts, is vital. Training for the volunteers in managing these situations is a responsibility of the volunteer’s organisation, but the facility has a key role to play here too.

Facility Staff may be unaware of the subtle signs of depression, grief, isolation and suicidal behaviours that place an older man at greater risk of harm. They may be too busy to pay attention and attendance at the group does not necessarily lessen this risk; it can in fact increase it, simply due to the long pent-up emotions that are being released. Before and after each group, care staff and the TOMNET coordinator discuss any man who may need follow-up attention. This is done informally and the staff person processes the occasion according to facility protocol.

Where required, follow-up referrals should be made on any matter of concern to appropriate facility personnel or your own staff after discussion with facility personnel. Outside referrals may be necessary to grief and loss counsellors, psychologists or health professionals. This is the responsibility of care facility staff.

Stage Three: Ongoing Activity

- All groups benefit from having at least one person nominated as the key point of contact and the organiser of the interactions. Where possible, appoint a skilled volunteer to coordinate and manage the facility Men's Group in collaboration with appropriate facility personnel. This person may work with the facility to resolve small issues, make decisions about things that happen on the meeting days, arrange who will do the tasks needed to ensure the group is organised each meeting day and to report back to the organisation regarding the progress of the group. Other volunteers may also enquire about how to become involved in the group.
- A volunteer coordinator may also provide advanced notice of further meetings or activities including guest speakers or special interest information. He should be assisted in this endeavour by other willing volunteers and perhaps by facility staff. Keeping the men engaged and looking forward to the next meeting is critical to keep attendance and support flowing for the group.
- Where appropriate, one-to-one visits between a facility man and a visiting staff professional from your organisation, such as a counsellor, community support worker or health worker may take place. Make sure that this type of arrangement is captured in your partnership agreement so that both parties know in which situations an approach may be made. Before undertaking the visit, ensure that it has been approved by your organisation's manager and/or appropriate facility personnel.
- Where necessary, the volunteers may assist facility staff to bring men to the meeting and return them to their quarters after the meeting. Facility staff often appreciate the assistance and making the offer increases the likelihood that sufficient men are able to attend the meeting to make it worthwhile.
- Encourage as much participation in the group as possible and continually foster the notion of group ownership and a sense of belonging. Find out what the men would like to do and who they would like to hear talk to them. Often just sharing stories with one another about their life is a great way to build relationships with others.
- Ensure that ongoing regular communication between the volunteer organisation and the facility takes place because of multiple changes that inevitably take place within such a program.

“It's the fellowship I enjoy. It takes us out of our rooms. We get to know one another and pick up something interesting about other fellows like what they have done in the past. The main thing is that we get to talk to one another.” Ron

Stage 4: Reviewing the men's group

Once the group is up and running, the final step is to work out how to maintain it over the longer term. There is always a danger with any new group that if interest should wain, only a small number of original participants will be left to hold it together. This won't necessarily achieve the original outcome which is to grow a men's group for the benefit and support of older men in the care facility.

“I'm a people person. I'm all for social interaction. Some of the men don't get involved and I feel sorry for them. I like engaging. It's good to meet people and socialise. Others would benefit if they came along. They would get something out of it. I like to stay physically, socially and mentally healthy and the group helps.” Bob

Some of the activities that you can undertake to maintain your men's group include:

- Monitor each meeting and attendance. Follow up members when they do not attend for a while with a friendly phone call. Find out if there is something that is preventing them from returning which the group may be able to assist with.
- Often men will not disclose when they are in a personal crisis preferring to deal with their problems alone. However one friendly call or drop-in visit from a volunteer from the group may be all that's required to offer friendship and support.
- Keep in regular contact with the facility and negotiate changes to the type and level of support being provided if necessary. As groups are a developing system they sometimes require a bit of 'tuning up' to get them running comfortably and smoothly. If you think that something is not working as well as it could, have a chat with someone from your organisation or facility personnel to address the problem.
- Many groups provide their own newsletter on a monthly basis to keep members up to date with what is happening and provide interesting updates and contributions from those in the community. Newsletters are particularly important when men are isolated or restricted in their ability to attend meetings. The newsletter keeps them involved and provides them with an important connection to the rest of the membership.