

Peer Volunteers

Helping PG&E employees make the journey back to “clean and sober”

By Eric Wolfe



W

hen John Kent’s “Peer Volunteer” cell phone rings, there’s a good chance it’s someone in trouble.

Kent knows about trouble. He used to find trouble regularly in a bottle, until he was caught drunk on the job. He remembers how hard it can be to ask for help when your best friend is a liquid.

“I didn’t want help. I thought I could take care of myself,” says Kent. “I was proved wrong over a period of time.”

Today, clean and sober for over a decade, Kent is making it easier for others to ask for help. As a Peer Volunteer at Pacific Gas & Electric, Kent takes confidential calls from people struggling with drugs or alcohol.

The phone he carries virtually around the clock is not a company phone. It’s not a union phone. It’s a Peer Volunteer phone. Even as Kent goes about his PG&E job in Vallejo, he’s ready to take calls from fellow employees who find themselves in a time of trouble.

Kent’s not alone in his mission. Twenty-one PG&E employees now carry Peer Volunteer phones. Like Kent, they take calls from employees looking for someone to confide in, someone they can trust, someone who has been there. Peer Volunteers take calls at night, on weekends, and during their regular work hours, but they’re not paid anything extra for their efforts. They are just individuals, volunteers, who’ve made the journey back to “clean and sober” and can offer a helping hand to others who want to make that same journey.



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'Can I Do This?'

James Tadena is a Lead Building Mechanic in Emeryville. He's been carrying a Peer Volunteer cell phone since 2001.

"When the phone rings it's such a rush," says Tadena. "Your name's out there on the poster and that's why they're calling you, and you think, 'Oh my God, can I do this?' And with the mind of the alcoholic I'm thinking, 'No, I can't.'"

But Tadena, 15 years sober come September, has learned to rise above the negative thinking of his alcoholic days. He answers the phone.

"After five or ten minutes of talking to us, they know we've been there, so it makes it easier for them to open up to us than to a supervisor or EAP," Tadena says.

EAP, the company's Employee Assistance Program, has a long track record of providing confidential assistance to employees seeking help for addiction or other problems. Peer Volunteers speak respectfully of EAP—its professionalism, its extensive resources, and its commitment to confidentiality.

But the simple truth is that some employees—especially if their thinking is skewed by alcohol or drugs—are disinclined to contact a company-run assistance program. Perhaps it's embarrassment, or fear of reprisal, or reluctance to be steered toward a program.

Peer Volunteers understand that not every caller is ready to get in-

involved in a program.

"A lot of the calls are just people wanting to know about the program," says Tadena. "We consider those contacts because a lot of times people will use that as a way of testing the water, putting their toe in the water."

Attraction, Not Promotion

The job of the Peer Volunteer is to make that first call a positive experience. That might mean hooking someone up with a treatment program. Or it might mean just listening to what the caller has to say.

"We don't demand anything of them, or tell them what they have to do," says Kent. "We're available to someone who wants help. They call us." The principle by which the program operates is "attraction, not promotion," he says.

Because the program attracts people in a variety of situations, Peer Volunteers must be prepared to adapt to each situation as it unfolds.

"I had one guy who wanted me to speak with his wife and (have her) explain what was going on," recalls Tadena, who ended up having almost as much contact with the spouse as with the employee. "I met with them at the recovery center, where I met her face to face, and explained to her what was going to happen while he was there, what to expect, and what was going to happen when he got out."

Kent remembers getting a call at 7:00 pm on a Friday night.

"Somebody wanted help, they wanted to get into a treatment program," Kent recalls. The caller was

ready for action then and there. Kent knew he had to act immediately.

"The window is only open for a little bit," says Kent. "People 'get well' pretty fast. They change their mind, they start feeling better. They say, 'It really isn't that bad, I'm only losing my home, my family, my job—nothing major.'"

Working through contacts at EAP and another agency, Kent had the caller "in a bed" within 24 hours. Two years later, Kent notes with some pride, that person is still sober and starting a new job.

Addiction Affects Everybody

Although the Peer Volunteer program is focused primarily on the individual, a successful recovery can benefit everyone who has been hurt by the individual's addiction.

When you're an alcoholic, says Kent, it affects everybody: your family, the people you work with, the people in other cars as you weave your way down the street.

Family members suffer from economic hardship when the alcoholic cannot work, or spends family resources on booze. Social isolation is often a problem as the family tries to hide the disease from friends, colleagues and other family members. Physical and psychological abuse at the hands of the alcoholic may force loved ones to seek medical care.

Drug and alcohol abuse also takes a heavy toll in the workplace, contributing to increased absenteeism, increased health costs, decreased productivity, and increased Workers Compensation claims. Some researchers have suggested that up to 40% of industrial fatalities and 47% of industrial injuries can be linked to alcohol consumption.

Employers may hope to solve the problem by simply discharging the abuser, but that solution falls short on several counts. First, the employer may not be able to identify the abuser until after serious damage has been done. Second, by returning "problem employees" to the hiring pool, employers are simply passing the problem around among themselves, not solving it. Third, termination means the employer loses whatever training and experience the employee has acquired, and must train a re-

Requirements to be a Peer Volunteer

— Any PG&E Employee—IBEW, ESC, A&T, Management —

1. Two or more years recovery from alcohol and/or drug addictions.
2. Current involvement in recovery is desired but not required.
3. A one-year commitment to the Program is desired. The EAP Supervisor has discretion to release a Peer Volunteer prior to the expiration of one year.
4. Break personal anonymity regarding the individual's involvement in recovery, which qualifies him/her to be a Peer Volunteer.
5. Consistent attendance at monthly meetings.
6. Approval from supervisor to use cell phones and to receive Peer Volunteer related phone calls on the job.
7. Continued good performance in his/her position at PG&E.
8. Ability to give and receive honest feedback.
9. Provide references from the following sources: Union, Supervisor, 12-step Program.
10. A current, valid California driver's license.

placement.

At PG&E, the cost of training a new journeyman is approximately \$200,000.

Many companies, PG&E included, recognize they have a self-interest in steering employees toward recovery. "Occupational alcoholism programs" began springing up after Alcoholics Anonymous put the problem of alcoholism in a new light beginning in the 1930s. Over the decades occupational alcoholism programs evolved into the more sophisticated Employee Assistance Programs found in corporate America today.

Big Hill to Climb

But recovery requires more than having referral services in place. Employees have to be willing to engage those services.

That's a big hill to climb when the referral program appears to have a management face.

"There are many employees at PG&E, and most particularly in the bargaining units, who have a lack of confidence in the Employee Assistance Program related to confidentiality," says Local 1245 Assistant Business Manager Roger Stalcup. "It may not be a well-placed concern, but it is prevalent."

After discussing this issue informally for a number of years, Local 1245 and PG&E in 2001 decided to establish a pilot program in San Francisco utilizing peer volunteers.



Roger Stalcup

Stalcup was a logical choice to represent the union in this pioneering effort. Like Kent and Tadena, Stalcup knows the problem of addiction first-hand. And he knows what a recovery program can mean to someone struggling to remain afloat.

"It gives you your life back. These are people who have reached bottom. They're struggling with the futility of life and living, and maybe at the point of giving up," says Stalcup, who celebrated 18 years of sobriety in May.

"Most addicts and alcoholics at

"After five or ten minutes of talking to us, they know we've been there, so it makes it easier for them to open up to us than to a supervisor or EAP."

James Tadena, Peer Volunteer

some point have seriously considered suicide if not actually tried it. By the power of the (recovery) program, we are slowly but surely being restored as happy, healthy, functional members of society," says Stalcup.

The pilot program didn't have to re-invent the wheel. People in trouble naturally turn for comfort or help to someone who has faced the same problem. The aim of the pilot program was to engage more people in this process of seeking help from peers.

The program recognized from the beginning that managers, too, may become ensnared by drug or alcohol addiction, and could benefit from speaking confidentially with their peers.

"Alcohol and drug addiction do not discriminate between blue collar, white collar, or management employees," observes Stalcup.

Accordingly, when the program was piloted in the San Francisco area, Peer Volunteers were welcomed from the ranks of management as well as from the IBEW and ESC bargaining units.

Spreading the Word

As the first official Peer Volunteer, Kent began introducing employees to the program through tailboard meetings and worksite visits. As word spread and more volunteers were recruited, the program was expanded to include the East Bay. A website was established, featuring photos of the Peer Volunteers along with their cell phone numbers.

The program grew because the concept was sound. At the same time, those involved in the program realized they couldn't continue to grow without administrative support.

"It had always been our intent to be system-wide. We'd gone as far as

we could go with no budget, no structure," says Kent. "We need support to function. The volunteers don't work in a vacuum."

Following a meeting in 2003 between program supporters and then-Senior Vice President Jim Randolph, PG&E agreed to provide funds for a parttime administrator, enabling the program to expand into the North Bay/Humboldt area at the beginning of 2004.

By spring, though, the program again was at a crossroads.

"In terms of available bodies or man-hours to support the program, we (had) exhausted all that is currently available," says Stalcup. The program had come this far on the soundness of its mission, the fervor of its volunteers, and the blessing of the company. If it was to go any further, it needed a commitment of cash.

Meeting with King

Opportunity knocked on May 6, when PG&E's new Senior Vice President and Chief of Utility Operations, Tom King, came to Weakley Hall for a lengthy get-acquainted meeting with union staff and stewards. Following that meeting, Local 1245 Business Manager Perry Zimmerman invited King to stay a bit longer for an update on the Peer Volunteer program. Stalcup and Kent briefed King on the program, its current value, and its future potential. Also in attendance were Human Resources Vice President Russ Jackson and Industrial Relations Director Steve Rayburn.

About a month later, EAP Supervisor Vanita Kunert met with King to discuss the financial resources that would be needed to maintain the

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If a peer is unavailable and you wish immediate assistance, please call the Employee Assistance Program at 1-888-445-4436 (24 hours a day/7 days a week).

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program's momentum.

"After hearing about the success of the program, it was an easy decision," says King, who agreed to additional funding. "The right thing for the company to do is to continue to fund and look for opportunities to expand the program. This organization's support and aid through the Peer Volunteer program will contribute to employees' well-being for years to come."

The new infusion of support from the company is a major boost for the program. Peer Volunteers will now have a full-time coordinator and part-time clerical support. This will enable the program to maintain its existing network, and to expand the program to General Office and to PG&E's "Area 3," encompassing Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Monterey and San Benito Counties.

Supporters of the program believe the current expansion can pave the way for subsequent expansions into the remaining areas within the PG&E system: Stockton, San Joaquin, Sacramento, Redding, Coast Valleys, and Diablo Canyon Power Plant.

"We truly believe that this program has the ability to save lives," says Local 1245's Zimmerman. "By continuing its commitment to Peer Volunteers, the company is paving the way for more people to come forward and get the help they need to become healthier, happier people—and better employees."

Recruiting More Volunteers

As the program begins expanding to PG&E's Area 3 in September, one of the most pressing needs will be recruitment of additional Peer Volunteers. Not everyone fits the job description.

Peer Volunteers must be two or more years into recovery from alcohol and/or drug addictions. They need to show continued good performance in their job at PG&E, and they need approval from their super-



Tom King

visor to use cell phones and to receive Peer Volunteer related phone calls on the job. (See "Requirements to be a Peer Volunteer", Page 6)

Even as Peer Volunteers agree to surrender their own anonymity in terms of their personal involvement with recovery programs, they have a deep commitment to protecting the anonymity of those who approach them for help. Confidentiality is not simply a formal requirement—the program couldn't exist without it.

Ironically, EAP maintains a similar commitment to confidentiality, and Peer Volunteers speak highly of EAP personnel. But the Peer Volunteer program has added a valuable new dimension to the effort to reach people in distress. Kent calls it "giving them another handle on the door to help."

Remaining True to the Model

Supervisors occasionally try calling Peer Volunteers about an employee with a problem. They don't get very far.

"We're not here for supervisory referrals. We're not here for supervisors to come out and say, 'Joe Blow has a drinking problem, you ought to go talk to him,'" says Tadena. "We don't want those calls. I stop them before they even start."

Peer Volunteers believe their program can work only if it remains true to the model of peers seeking out peers. There's no room for management as an intermediary.

On the other hand, supervisors are welcome to contact the program if they themselves are struggling with drug or alcohol addiction. Any employee of PG&E is free to seek help from any Peer Volunteer, some of whom are management employees, Stalcup notes.

To reinforce the principle of confidentiality, the Peer Volunteer program does not publicize its services on the company's internal website. Instead, Peer Volunteers maintain a site on the World Wide Web. Anyone with access to a computer and an Internet connection can visit the Peer Volunteer site at www.peervolunteers.org/.

"It can be accessed through the Internet without anyone from the company or union being aware of it," says Stalcup. "It's another step to

promote confidentiality and trust."

On the website, you can take self-quizzes to explore whether you have a problem with drugs or alcohol. You can also find a list of Peer Volunteers, complete with photos and phone numbers. For someone with a problem, help is truly just a phone call away.

Likewise, if you're someone already well along the road to recovery, you can use the website to get more detailed information on what a Peer Volunteer does, and to apply to become a Peer Volunteer yourself.

The Peer Volunteers are serious about expanding the program. It takes about six months to roll it out in a single PG&E area.

"Area 3 should be up and running by March, 2005," says Stalcup. "Assuming there is a bit of additional funding at that time, we will then look to expand the program to another area."

With incremental increases in company funding, Stalcup figures Peer Volunteers can be a system-wide program in two-and-a-half years.

Desire to Heal

But for Peer Volunteers, the desire to expand the program isn't about budgets or geography. It's rooted in something much deeper: the desire to heal themselves. An underlying principle of recovery, says Stalcup, "is to carry the message to those who still suffer." Helping others, he says, is an intrinsic part of the process of staying clean and sober yourself.

Kent will tell you right up front he is still working on his own recovery every day. Crucial to that effort, he says, is "to work with other people."

"In working with them," he says, "I'm seeing myself again and again. No matter where that person comes from, what they're doing, what their job is, if they're an alcoholic, we think alike," says Kent.

Kent's life experience has given him insight into a side of the human condition that most people would hope to never see. It is a dark side. But it is precisely that insight that makes Kent, and a growing number of others, perfectly suited for the role they have carved out for themselves on their road to recovery.

They're Peer Volunteers.