



# REPORT

*From the office of the...*

## Associate Vice-President Services

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TO:	Executive Board
FROM:	Kristina Epifano
SUBJECT:	Peer Support Line Review
DATE:	Friday, February 16, 2018

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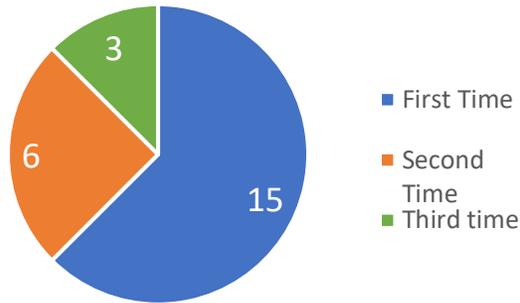
The MSU peer support line (PSL) is a service that provides peer-based support for students over the phone and through an online chat system. They're hours of operation are from 7pm-1am 7 days a week, and they piloted extended hours during the months of November and March. The service currently operates with one director and one assistance director, 2 promotions coordinators and an events coordinator. There are currently 29 volunteers who take the roles of Peer Listeners on the other end of the phone line or chat. PSL currently does not have their own space, but has in the past. This presents as a challenge for the service, they can no longer keep snacks for volunteers in the space, have no place for storage and sharing a space can threaten confidentiality of listeners. Other challenges that the service has encountered for many years is crisis calls and the burden/strain placed on the director of the service. PSL has always done a great job at providing peer-support for students, however lately the calls coming in require more than solely peer-based support. As of right now, when the listeners receive a crisis call, they are told to direct the call/get in contact with security (if on-campus/in residence) or Crisis Outreach And Support Team (off-campus). The volunteers are students, and these calls and chats can become stressful and emotionally draining to a point where they require support themselves. The main source of support for listeners comes from the director of the service, which places additional stress, time and emotional labour on the individual. The committee has identified a lack of support available for PSL volunteers and executives from the MSU and do not see this as a sustainable model moving forward. Throughout this review process, the committee has worked to take the challenges faced by the service, and to find feasible solutions. Below is a record of the research we have compiled, as well as recommendations for the service moving forward now and long term.

### Internal Survey

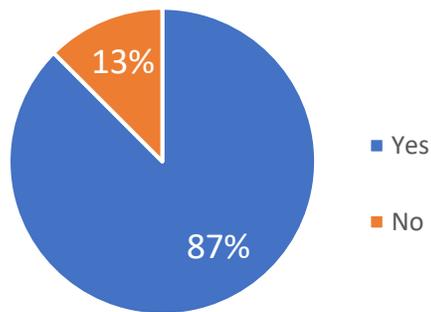
The committee created a survey that was sent out to current volunteers of the service to grasp an idea of their experience while being a peer listener. From the survey data, most volunteers were first time volunteers with the service. We found that peer listeners felt as though training prepared them for their roles, they felt most comfortable responding to academic support, relationship challenges, and mental health related calls, which aligns well with the services mandate.

Internal Survey

*For how many years have you volunteered with PSL?*



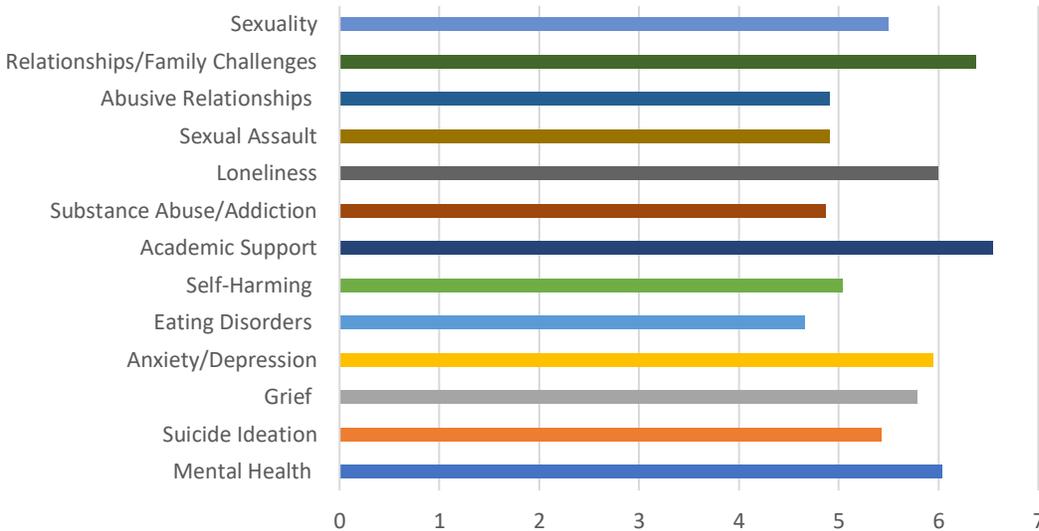
*Prior to becoming a peer listener, you received training in the following areas: Suicide Protocol, The role of a listener, Confidentiality, ASIST and Peer Support Training. Did these sessions make you feel prepared for your first call/chat?*



Those who said no, explained training was lacking in the following areas:

- ASIST training felt bare in some areas, specifically in support during training by the individuals running it
- I wish I could be given a chance to observe a returning volunteer partake in a real call or chat so I can get an appropriate feel
- There was not enough emphasis on the different types of scenarios one may encounter, and how to deal with each scenario. Besides this, the ASIST external trainers were highly unprofessional

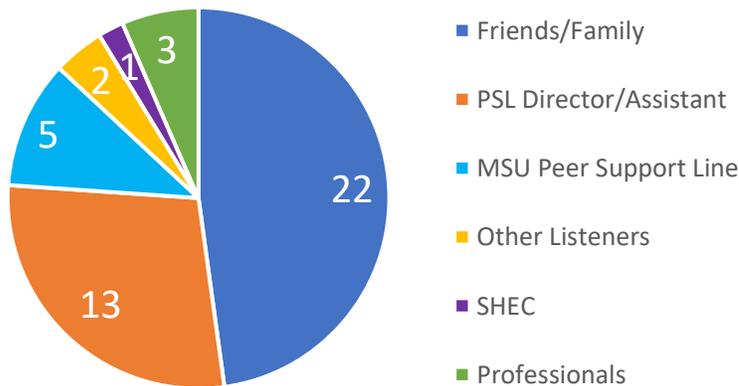
Reflect on your experience when answering calls/chats and supporting individuals on the other end of the line. Please rate the following topics on a scale of 1 (I was not very prepared/comfortable) to 7 (I was very prepared/comfortable)



Other observations from this question:

- More than 5 individuals rated their comfort levels higher for suicide ideations than mental health
- More than 5 individuals rated their comfort levels higher for suicide ideation than anxiety/depression

As a listener, you spend hours supporting other individuals, which at times can be draining and difficult. Where do you go to seek support when you need it? (Please select all that apply)

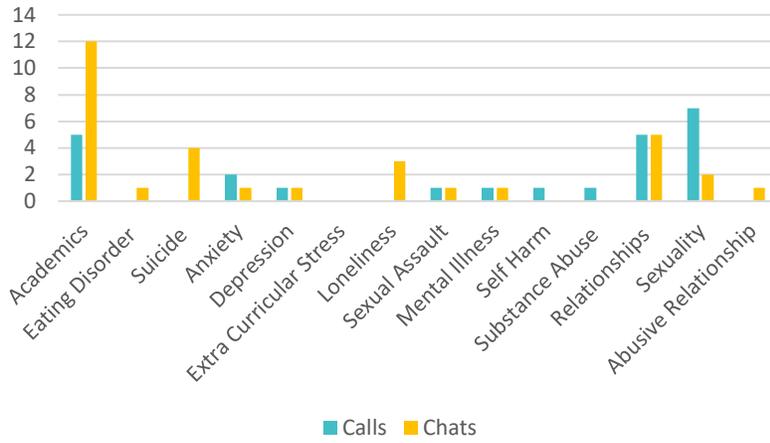


### Internal Data

The committee received data on usage from this past fall, as well as the entirety of the last school year (2016-2017). We analysed the usage and topics from the call and chat logs and graphed the data to identify trends between months, years and peak times. Chats tended to have a higher usage than phone calls. We also see a peak in usage during exam times (December and April). The service received 1-2 calls on average per evening.

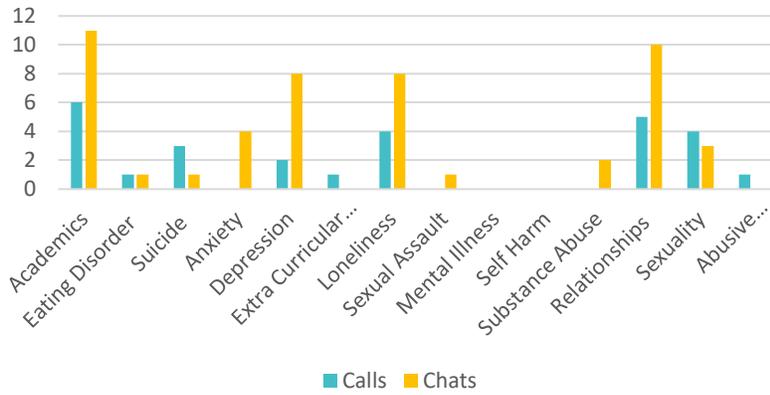
Comparison between September 2016 and September 2017

Sept 2016



Calls: 21  
Chats: 36  
Repeat Caller: 0

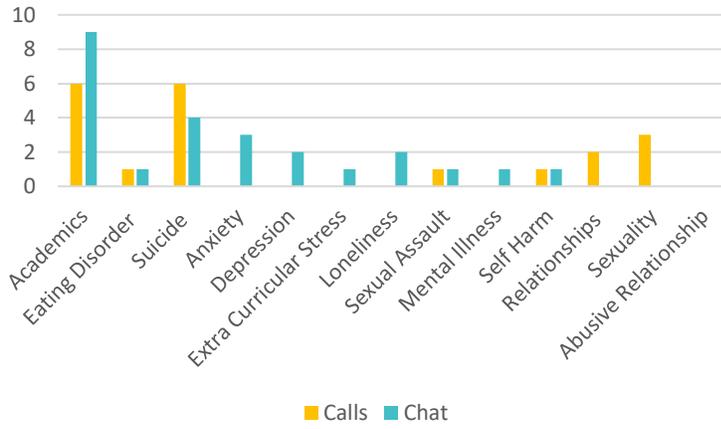
Sept 2017



Calls: 25  
Chats: 41  
Repeat Caller: 7

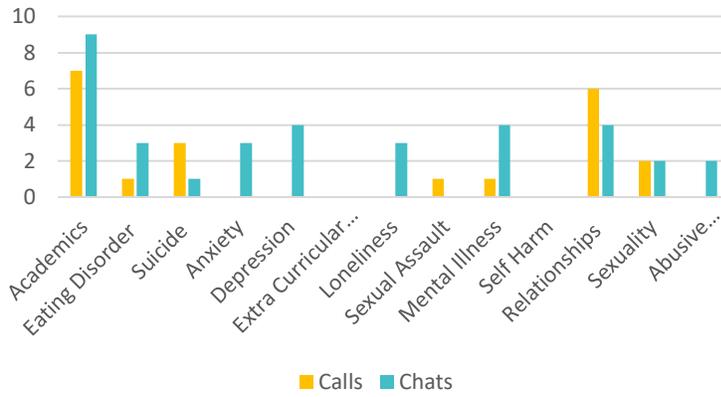
Comparison of calls between October 2016 and October 2017

October 2016



Calls: 14  
Chats: 26  
Repeat Caller: 0

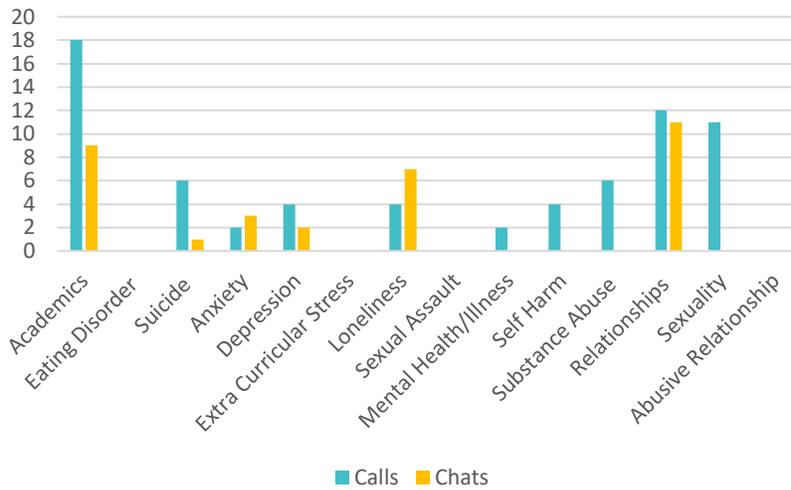
October 2017



Calls: 14  
Chats: 26  
Repeat Caller: 2

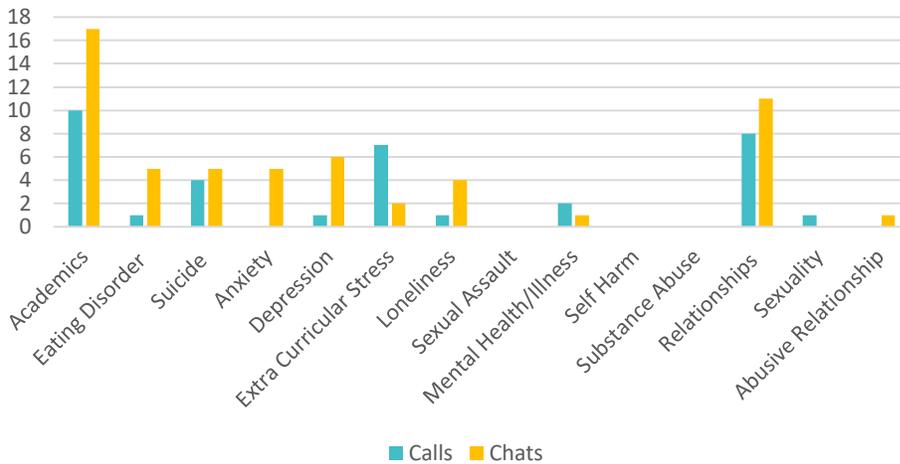
Comparison between December 2016 Exam Season and April 2017 Exam Season

Dec 2016



Calls: 51  
Chats: 27  
Repeat Caller: 27

April 2017

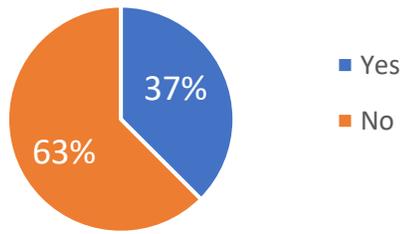


Calls: 32  
Chats: 45  
Repeat Caller: 7

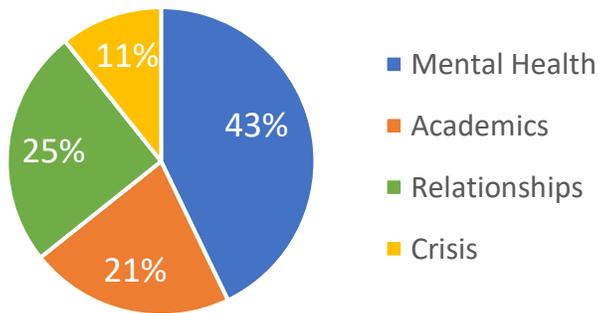
External Survey

The committee created a survey that was promoted to the McMaster community in order to gain a student’s perspective and users experience of the service. The survey received 41 responses and majority of responders were individuals who had not used the service. Out of those who had used the service, most were seeking mental health or academic support, and experience was satisfactory, averaging a little over 5/7.

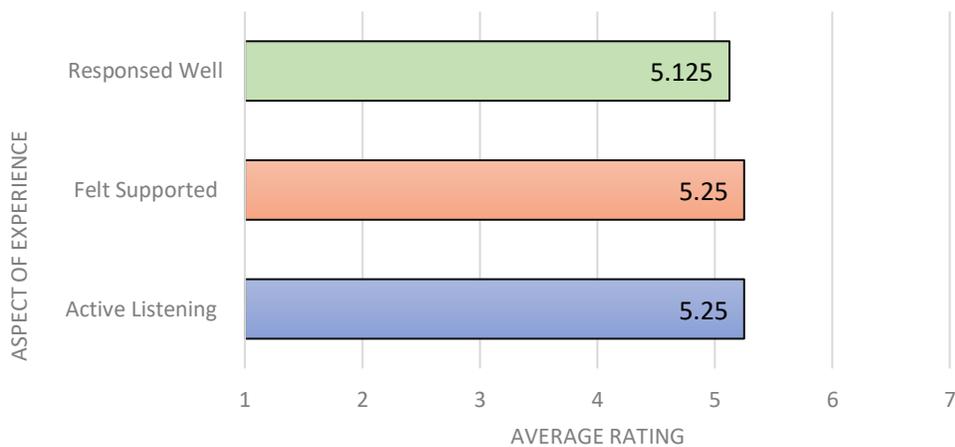
Have you called/chatted with PSL?



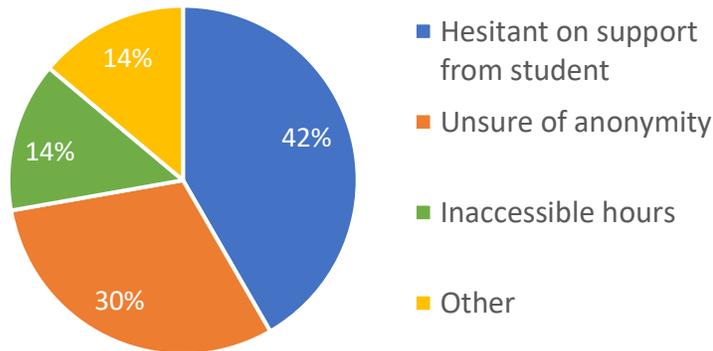
What was the reason behind the chat or the call?



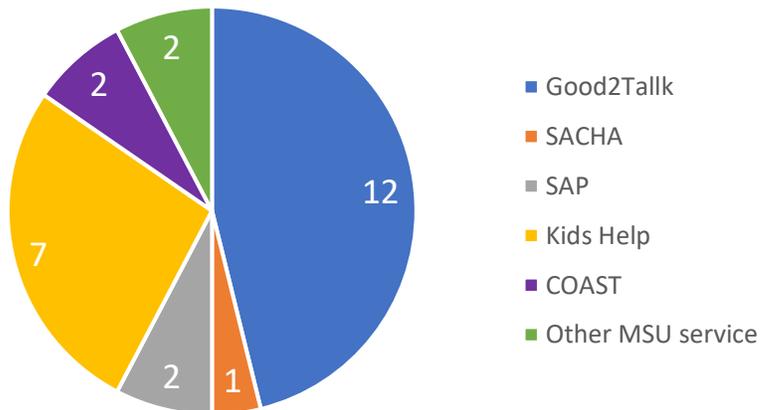
Please rate your experience was in the following aspects. From 1 not satisfactory, to 7 being very satisfactory. NOTE: please rate "0" if you have never used the Peer Support Line



*If you have NEVER used PSL, do you have any reservations about the service delivery?*



*Have you ever accessed other help line related resources (select all that apply)*



### External Research

The committee performed research in two areas, looking at universities across Canada and their services with a similar structure and mandate, as well as organizations/services that exist currently at McMaster and in the Hamilton community that provide a similar service.

In our external research, we found that very few universities offered a service similar to PSL, yet a common trend was a Peer Support Center. For universities that did have a phone line, it was usually paired with their centre, and had a mix of student volunteers and professionals.

### McGill University

**Peer support centre** - in person

- Open 9am-7pm
- Receptionist → confidentiality agreement → walk into sealed appointment room = 45min appointment
- Make an appointment online
- Hire in the winter semester for the following fall

- Provide alternate hotlines and mcgill resources
- Training: active listening, ethical conduct, confidentiality and common student issues. Led by mcgill and montreal community such as McGill Mental Health Service, McGill Counselling Service, Rez Project, SEDE and the Office of the Dean of Students.

#### **“Nightline” = PSL**

- Confidential: crisis management and referrals
- Service offered in English
- Run by students
- They accept calls from all → even those who are not from McGill
- Open 7x days a week 6pm - 3am
  - Only open during the semester not reading weeks
- **Chatline:** runs Thursday - Sunday 6pm-3am
- Section of the website for additional phone lines that people can call during the hours they are not open along with McGill and Montreal area resources
- Hire at the beginning of both semesters

#### **Queen’s University: AMS Peer Support Centre (Walk In or Call)**

- Hours of operation: centre is open 10am-10pm all days of the week (Sept. to April, closed for summer)
- Space: Peer Support Centre, JDUC Room 34 and 26 (supported by Queen’s Student Wellness Services and partnered with Addiction and Mental Health Services mobile crisis workers who provide emergency crisis support)
- Training: all volunteers undergo extensive training, including peer helping skills, suicide awareness, health and wellness, grief, human rights, sexual assault, domestic violence/abuse, anti-oppression, accessibility, and positive space training
- Anonymity: not anonymous, but directs to anonymous call centre
- Events/campaigns: support booths and events, facilitate residence outreach program
- Personnel structure: Peer Support Centre operates with five volunteer coordinators and approximately 100 volunteers
- Confidentiality agreements/protocol: service operates according to confidentiality agreement signed before conversation (if you call, volunteer goes over finding resources on campus and online but recommend coming to in-person drop in)

#### **Carleton University: Carleton Sexual Assault Peer Support Line**

- Hours of operation: All days of week, 8am-midnight (Sept. to April, closed for summer)
- Space: Sexual Assault Centre
- Training: takes place in November, applications open to all
- Anonymity: volunteers remain anonymous, calls are confidential
- Events/campaigns: public outreach and education, advocacy (rallies), community and solidarity building, organize amazing sex-positive events, workshops
- Personnel structure: unpaid volunteers recruited from any program; the coalition involves students, graduates, professors, public servants, support workers
- Confidentiality agreements/protocol: free and confidential

## University of Alberta

### Peer Support Centre

- Drop in service
  - Appointment takes 1-2 business days to be confirmed
- Help line (780-492-4357)
  - 9am-8pm Mon-Fri, Reading Week: 10am-6pm
- Client feedback form through their website: <https://www.su.ualberta.ca/services/psc/>
- Student volunteers
  - Provide presentations to parents, student groups fraternities, RAs
  - Host events to promote
  - Self scheduled shifts
  - Two volunteers per time slot
  - Volunteer contract signed
  - Goal is to empower and connect/refer students to personal and external resources for future stressors
  - Short term service: 1-2 sessions per student
  - Students and non-students welcome
  - Commitments
    - 3 hours/week of shift room time (self scheduled)
    - 4 hours/month of team time, including mandatory monthly meetings, planning events, etc.
    - 3 hours/month of ongoing role plays to keep skills up to par.
    - 2 hours/semester of Professional Development sessions per semester (offered monthly)
    - TOTAL: \*\*16.5 Hours/Month or ~ 5.4 Hours/Week.
  - Team Division
    - Outreach Team: presentations, increasing awareness
    - Social Planning Team: internal team hosting events for the volunteers
    - Training Team: Personal Development sessions for the volunteers
  - Training
    - 37 hours of training in the beginning
    - Ongoing role play training
    - Supportive listening model

## University of Ottawa

- “Peer help centre”
- They have peer helpers (office volunteers), peer mentors (school based), and peer listeners
- Monday 11-5:30 & Tuesday - Friday: 11-4pm
- They have an in person space and online
- They have active listening sessions on drop-in or appointment
- Phone line: 7-1am
  - Provides help and information to students facing everything from homesickness and academic stress to a wide variety of personal circumstances such as abuse, sexual identity confusion, family dynamics, and crisis situations.
- Peer support chat
  - 7:00 pm to 1:00 am from Monday to Friday.
- *The centre is a cross between like mentoring and academic support and other services **kind of a cross between SSC + SWC***

## **Community (Hamilton & McMaster) Peer Support Organizations**

### **Good2Talk**

- Post-Secondary Student Help Line
- Professionals or informational, resources, referrals
- Confidential
- 24/7 hours
- Only cell phone services
- Provide event support – will come to your event if asked

#### Focus

- academic-related stress and anxiety, relationship, employment or financial challenges, concerns with substance use and abuse, panic or crisis and thoughts of suicide

#### Do not focus on

- medical or psychiatric diagnoses, legal advice, financial advice or detailed OSAP information, couples therapy or academic counselling

#### Staff/training

- Good2Talk is a bilingual phone service staffed by qualified, paid professionals with education, professional experience and specialized training in either counselling or information and referral. Counsellors are required to have degrees in a relevant discipline (e.g. psychology, or social work), a minimum of three years' applicable work experience in social services and experience in telephone counselling and crisis intervention. Information and Referral Specialists must have a minimum of three years' experience in the health/human services field and a degree in a relevant discipline and are certified as Alliance of Information and Referral Systems (AIRS) professionals. All helpline staff have Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST).
- Student ambassador program – volunteer

### **COAST – Crisis Outreach and Support Team**

- 24/7 call line
- Telephone support or mobile visit – mental health worker triage
  - Daily, between 8 am to midnight, the outreach mobile unit, consisting of a mental health worker and a police officer, is able to go to the mental health crisis situation
- Provided by STJ
- Management plan to diffuse situation and then follow up plan

#### Staff

- child and youth crisis workers, mental health workers, nurses, social workers and plain-clothes police officers

### **SAP – Student Assistance Program**

- Powered by Aspiria
- Main focus on psychological counselling and academic life services
- Counselling and Legal help
- Telephone, online, app, in-person, web-cam

- Confidential – or in-person in external office
- Educational resources, events, talks, articles
- 

#### Staff

- Master's level counsellors
- 180 different languages

#### **MSU Peer Support Services**

- identity-based services (QSCC, WGEN, Maccess)
- non-identity based (SHEC)
- Offer in-person peer support for students
- Run events and campaigns that align with their specific mandate
- Operating hours of spaces vary between the hours of 9am and 5pm, with specific programming occurring after 5pm
- Students can go to the space if looking for support or with questions, the space is filled with informational resources, as well as student volunteers
- Volunteers received training 3-4 times a year, which consists of Peer Support Training, anti-Oppressive Practices Training, Sexual Violence Response Training, scenarios and services specific training

#### **Recommendations**

The committee has outlined two potential directions for the service, and has offered recommendations for both below.

#### **Direction A**

##### *1a) The MSU continues to operate the Peer Support Line as a service*

The Peer Support Line offers students a place to seek support from peers. The service excels in terms of offering support in areas of academic stress, relationship challenges and general mental health support. The usage is fairly high and individuals who have used the service have reported it to be a good experience. Service delivery in many areas is smooth and positive, but it very much depends on the topic of conversations.

##### *2a) The MSU should add an “forward” option to the PSL phones, so listeners are able to forward people to other services if needed*

The Peer Support Line offers great support for students in many areas, however the crisis calls are hindering the service to operate smoothly. When crisis calls come in, listeners would have the option to forward the call to SAP, Good2Talk or COAST where the student can seek the support they may be looking for/may require. This allows for the service to still operate as a peer-support based service, and offer support in areas that are within their realm.

*3a) The Peer Support Line should create a Crisis Protocol, alongside the TRRA, other peer support services and the Vice-President Administration*

The way that our peer support services handle crisis situations should be standardized and contain clearly outlined steps for volunteers to follow. This crisis protocol should be created in collaboration with necessary stakeholders and partners, to grasp what needs to be included as well as what is in the realm of scope/is expected from peer support volunteers

*4a) The MSU should look to find PSL their own space, that is not occupied throughout the day by another service or group*

Having to share a space has been a challenge for the members of this service. They are unable to store snacks, belongings of the service and resources/supports for volunteers. This year, the PTM expressed sharing a space brought forward challenges in regard to cleanliness and lack of storage, resulting in her having to bring things back and forth for each shift. Having a space will also help ground and bring together volunteers, they can make it feel comfortable, have recognition boards, provide snacks and create a space that is special for their volunteers. This space would ideally be in a discrete location, and the service would be able to make it their own.

*5a) The Peer Support Line should maintain their current hours of operation, 7 days a week from the hours of 7pm-1am. They should not continue with extended hours until 2am.*

From both the internal and external survey, students stated that time it would be most useful to have a peer support listener available were between the hours of 8pm and 1am, both on weekdays and weekends. On the internal survey, volunteers stated the most optimal time to volunteer would be from the hours of 8pm-1am, and almost all of them stated the current hours are perfect.

*6a) The MSU should increase promotions of Student Assistance Plan alongside PSL, in order to identify to students when to use what service*

Having the two services promoted alongside each other gives students a better understanding of the role of each service and outlines their options when they do need support. The two services offer different types of support, one being professional and the other being peer-based, so they provide overall support for students depending on their needs.

## **Direction B**

*1b) The MSU should no longer operate the Peer Support Line as a service*

Over the years, the Peer Support Line has been receiving an increase in their number of crisis calls. The line is turning into a crisis line, which is not what volunteers are equipped to handle. When the line was first introduced, there were not as many resources available to students as there is now. The service requires a crisis protocol that is suited for their volunteers, increased support available for volunteers and the PTM, as both are overworked and endure a large amount of emotional labour, and better promotions of the actual capabilities of our volunteers. The committee is unsure if the necessary items that are required to keep the service

sustainable, are actually feasible for the MSU. Ideally, in a few years, we will have a Peer Support Center in the Student Activity Building, along with an expanded Student Wellness Center in the Peter George Building, which are optimal and fall in line with the model of other universities.

*2b) The MSU should incorporate a Chat Line function into other peer support services*

The chat function of the Peer Support Line was used more often than the call line. Adding this aspect of service to other peer support services, starting with SHEC, allows students to still access anonymous peer-based support when needed. After discussing with Pauline, this is feasible to implement on any services web page, and we can pilot it for a year to see whether or not it is beneficial, and what exactly it is being used for by students.

*3b) The MSU should collaborate with Good2Talk on increasing promotions on campus, and running campus events*

Good2Talk is a service that is promoted around campus, however, moving forward they should have a larger presence on campus in order to interact with students and outreach their resources. Good2Talk is open to running events with the MSU and on campus for students throughout the year, increasing their presence could increase the usage and give students another option for anonymous support. Good2Talk is a bilingual and is staffed by qualified, paid professionals with education, professional experience and specialized training in either counselling or information and referral, which is overall more beneficial for students.

*4b) The MSU should increase promotions of the Student Assistance Program (SAP)*

SAP has not been promoted nearly enough throughout the past two years. The numbers in terms of usage are not high, but many students still do not know that this service exists. SAP offers professional support for students in many different areas and moving forward it should be promoted as much as any of our other MSU services.

*5b) The MSU should allocate a portion of the PSL budget to other peer support services*

The committee believes that there may be an influx in usage of other peer support services with the elimination of PSL. The MSU should ensure these services are financially supported to continue operations, purchase additional resources, enhance training and improve events/campaigns as they may be filling a gap for the time being while SAP and Good2Talk become more present on campus.