TO: Student Representative Assembly  
FROM: Preethi Anbalagan, VP Administration  
SUBJECT: Rescind Operating Policy - Peer Support Line  
DATE: February 21, 2018

Dear Student Representative Assembly,

This memo is meant to provide a detailed rationale as to why the members should rescind MSU Peer Support Line as a service of the organization. This past year, we have conducted a service review of Peer Support Line, consulted with an array of stakeholders, including members of the service, users of the service, and other external partners of the organization, for some guidance and insight. Through extensive and meaningful conversations, the Executive Board and the Services Committee are proposing that we rescind OPERATING POLICY - MSU PEER SUPPORT LINE.

As outlined in my delegation from the floor, Peer Support Line is no longer necessary to fill gaps within this institution, due to the emergence and heightened use of Student Assistance Program, COAST, Good2Talk, Ontario Victim Support Line, Assaulted Women's Helpline, etc. MSU services are created in the intention of filling perceived gaps. Those gaps of year's past are now filled. We should be enthusiastic that both the University and provincial government have responded to this need, so that we as a Assembly can serve students through different avenues and systems of support.

If you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to reach out to me ahead of the meeting.

Sincerely,

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Overview
The MSU Peer Support Line was established after Siobhan Stewart’s presidential platform in 2013. Members of the Student Wellness Centre, University administration, student volunteers and members of the MSU came together to figure out the logistics, administration, and field any perceived challenges associated with the creation of the line. The pilot launch occurred in the second term of the 2012-2013 year, with roles created to best support and provide resources to individuals seeking the support line and those operating it.

The MSU Peer Support Line was created at a time where conversations surrounding mental health and illnesses were minimal, insufficient and barely scraped the surface of some of the nuances surrounding wellness and illness. There weren't many resources on campus that addressed how different communities experience and navigate mental illness in distinct ways. Specifically, there weren't anonymous support lines offered by the government or University for these conversations to be had and supported. However, as time progressed, new peer support services such as WGEN and Maccess were developed to address identity-based needs. Last year, the Student Wellness Centre received additional $100,000 in funding to expand their resources such as number of counselors and wellness educators. With the construction of the Peter George Building, there will be an expanded floor dedicated to the Student Wellness Centre and with the Student Activity Building, even more space will be dedicated to peer support counseling.

Since PSL’s inception, the government of Ontario has created similar services such as Good2Talk, in partnership with the Kids Help Phone, to provide a free and confidential helpline specifically designed for post-secondary students in Ontario. With the addition of more mental health resources, on-going advocacy and provision of similar phone-line services, it is my belief that MSU Peer Support Line has helped the sector recognize a gap and move towards offering essential services to address the need.

Service Review & Recommendations
Below are the proposed recommendations from the Services Committee:

1) The MSU should no longer operate the Peer Support Line as a service
   Over the years, the Peer Support Line has received an increase in their number of crisis calls. The line, though not intended to be not trained to be, 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 are 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. 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.

2) *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.

3) *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.

4) *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 professionals support for students in many different areas and moving forward it should be promoted as much as any of our other MSU services.

5) *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 to prepare for a potential increase in service usage.

**Executive Board & Recommendations:**

Executive Board, after extensive discussion, has adopted the direction to no longer operate Peer Support Line as a service for the *proposed reasons with some revision.*
1) The MSU should no longer operate the Peer Support Line as an MSU service. For reasons mentioned in the service review and because Peer Support Line has fulfilled its lifecycle. Some limitations to the service included the inability to offer extended counseling and with the introduction of Student Assistance Program to our Health Plan, it offers users opportunity to pursue extended support. In the Student Assistance Program 2016-2017 report, 80% of cases requested extended counseling completed through SAP.

2) The MSU should create a working group to develop creative promotional strategies for existing support lines and services, such as the Student Assistance Program and Good2Talk. This working group will aim to develop creative content and explore unique strategies to promote and advertise existing phone-lines that students can access. The group will consist of SRA members, MSU members, SWELL representatives and the Administrative Services Coordinator who will consult with the Communications Department to plan promotions. Some promotional strategies may include window banners, Welcome Week distribution cards or Welcome Week wellness tents. Furthermore, the committee can be responsible for collaborating with Good2Talk, which offers an outreach team that can be requested for free to help support on-campus events, offer training workshops and various activities.

3) The MSU should allocate a portion of the PSL budget to this working group and other peer support services. For reasons mentioned in the service review, to establish a budget to continue promotions of the Student Assistance Plan and other existing helplines, thus helping students access the various crisis and non-crisis help lines available.

3) The MSU will promote student volunteer opportunities within Good2Talk, such as their Student Ambassador Program. Good2Talk offers involvement opportunities for students looking to contribute to the campus community through mental health and wellness initiatives, campaigns and events. The ambassadors complete training related to the phone-line and are required to have strong knowledge of mental health resources and supports on campus that they can promote. It’s important to consider that Peer Support Line offered volunteer opportunities but through the promotion of this ambassador program, there will be continued opportunities to engage with student helplines.

4) The MSU should continue to develop and establish the Caring Communities Network alongside the Student Wellness Centre and their Wellness Educators. This year, Chukky has developed and initiated the Caring Communities Network as a capacity-building program that exists to build capacity amongst students and community members to support and enhance student wellbeing. Whether it is a club or student society, a member is trained to be a Wellbeing Liaison that can provide support and referrals to students in need. This is incredibly important to highlight, as it takes a
shared approach in providing wellness services and resources to students on campus. While it is still at its infancy, the MSU should invest resources and personnel into developing and honing this pilot program to ensure that peer support services continue to be offered.

5) The MSU should continue to offer identity-based peer support and look into other forms of identity-based support programming and initiatives. In the service review, it is evident that PSL supported a variety of users and it’s important that the MSU continue to offer identity-based support such as support sessions offered through Maccess, the Black & Gendered support group through WGEN, etc. Other initiatives that can be explored are integrating a peer support element to Diversity Services that address mental health and well-being of racialized folk, as well as strengthening our trans-related programming through QSCC. This is already being done under the advisement of members within QSCC, as well as the 2018/2019 QSCC coordinator who is assisting in the re-branding and renovations of the current QSCC space.

6) The MSU should continue to hone our Peer Support Department and explore the prospects of a Peer Support Centre in the Student Activity Building. In the current floor plans, I’ve included a space (circled in green) that is modeled after Peer Support Centers within other student unions. A common lounge area is presented with individual office spaces that envelope the area, which can be used for one-on-one peer support and storage for our services. The idea of a Peer Support Centre is not foreign, and in fact, it has been long advocated for by our service managers and past Vice Presidents (Administration). Moreover, Peer Support Centers are a common trend across student unions, including McGill University, Queen’s University, University of Alberta, University of Ottawa and Western University, to name only a few. However, there is still discussion to be had around this center’s establishment. The MSU should continue to have these discussions, as finding a physical space is no longer the limitation as it is now with the lack of consistent space for PSL.
Moving Forward
The MSU Peer Support Line was created at a time where help lines did not exist and we needed an anonymous, confidential service that could receive calls and provide peer support to students through a wide range of issues that may be impacting their mental health and well-being, including depression, anxiety, loneliness, etc. However, over the years the Peer Support Line has unintentionally and inappropriately evolved into a crisis line that performs trauma intake and referral to other phone lines or services on campus. It’s important to consider the immense demand and labor it places on our students who are bound to confidentiality and experiencing secondary traumatic stress. While the work of PSL speaks to our capacity for empathy, which is a strength, it’s equally important to consider taking care of ourselves when taking care of others. With the emergence of support and crisis lines offered by trained and professional case workers, Peer Support Line is no longer needed as both the Government and University have stepped up to providing case management, professional counseling and help lines that prioritize the same level of confidentiality and anonymity.

This recommendation is certainly not to suggest that the MSU Peer Support Line has not done enough, but rather they have done the most and in doing so, have arrived at the end of their life cycle.