

Circle of Care Support Group Program
Frequently Asked Questions for Prospective Volunteers

The Volunteer Program

Q – Who Volunteers with Circle of Care?

A – Our volunteers are from all parts of the Bay Area community. Most have had personal experience with loss in their lives, and want to provide support to families. Having a personal loss is not a requirement to becoming a volunteer, but can be helpful. Some volunteers are considering professions in the field of mental health and are seeking more experience supporting grieving families. Others come to volunteer because they are missing that connection to community and purpose in their current professions and life and want to make a difference for a child coping with loss.

Q. How much time do I need to commit to volunteering? How much time is expected of me?

A- We ask for a minimum of a 14-month commitment to Circle of Care that includes facilitating twice monthly group sessions and regular email contact between support group facilitator teams during the intervening weeks. (Our program works on the Oakland Unified School District schedule which means we do not meet during Thanksgiving Break, Spring Break, Winter Break or the summer months for regular groups, but volunteers typically provide other programmatic support when they can during those times.)

This minimum 14 month commitment is essential for our families to experience consistency and continuity during a difficult time in their lives. Support Group volunteers come to Circle of Care from 5:30 to 9:30 every other week. You need to be able to commit to coming to all groups sessions for those 14 months. In practice, we find that most of our volunteers find this program so rewarding, that the average length of service is 3-1/2 years.

Q. Why do I need to be Live Scanned?

A.- Circle of Care is required by California State law to Live Scan (fingerprint) all volunteers who will be working with children with the FBI & The Department of Justice. Even if you have been Live Scanned or fingerprinted before, you will need to do it again for the East Bay Agency for Children. Fingerprinting results are specific to the agency/organization that orders them and are not transferrable from previous locations that you may have worked at.

Q - Is there a minimum age to volunteer?

A. Yes, you need to be 21 to volunteer. This volunteer work requires you to make a commitment to be here for the groups you are scheduled for. It is important that we provide consistency to the children who have experienced a death in their family. Currently we do not have support group facilitator openings for anyone under 21 years old as we have found that it is very difficult for young adults to make this 14 month commitment.

Q. Does it cost anything to become a volunteer?

A. Attending our training is free as long as you complete the training AND your 14 month volunteer commitment with Circle of Care. If after completing the four day training you are for some reason unable to follow through with your 14 month commitment then we will charge you \$200.00 for the cost of the training and the training manual. It is really important that when you are accepted to become a support group facilitator that we can count on you to follow through with your commitment and fill the spots of those volunteers transitioning out of the program. This ensures that we can have enough volunteers to fully staff the groups and continue to provide support to the families we serve.

Q. Do I need a background in counseling or psychology to be a part of this program?

A. No. Our volunteers come from a variety of backgrounds. We are looking for adults over 21 who care deeply about children, their caregiver adults (sometimes parents, sometimes aunts, uncles or siblings) and their welfare and have an interest in learning more about them and being able to help them hold and manage the multitudes of feelings that they are experiencing.

Q. If I didn't experience a major loss in my childhood can I still be a volunteer?

A. Yes. Though it is typical that most of our volunteers have some form of personal experience with serious illness or death, it is not always in childhood. Compassion, listening skills and the wish to understand the child or adult's experience are the most important elements of this work.

Q. What is the most important thing a volunteer can do to prepare for this work?

A. It is important to think carefully about whether this is a time in your life when you can make this commitment. You will become a very important person to the children and caregiver adults you work with and if you are unable to fulfill your commitment, this will feel like another loss to them. It is also important for you to be in a good place around losses you may have experienced in your life. If you have recently experienced a significant illness or loss, it may not be the right time for you to begin to volunteer.

Q – How do participants find you?

A – We receive referrals from hospitals, doctor’s offices, funeral homes, hospices and many community service organizations including domestic violence programs and police departments. A fair number of our participants get referred to us through friends, classmates and the web, especially Berkeley Parent’s Network.

Q - Where do they come from? And what are they dealing with really?

A – Our families come from all over the East Bay. Some have lived with an ill family member for years, and some are just beginning the journey. We also serve families in the community who have experienced an unexpected loss due to tragedy. For this reason we offer 3 distinctly different group nights: Living with Illness, Living with Loss and Living with Sudden Loss.

Q - How long do people typically volunteer?

A – As stated earlier, though the minimum commitment is 14 months for facilitators, the average length of service for our volunteers is 3-1/2 years, but some folks have been with us for as long as ten years!

A- What are the time expectations?

A- In addition to arriving at Circle of Care by 5:30pm on your assigned night, and staying through until 9 or 9:30, depending on the circumstances of the night, volunteers are expected to stay in regular email contact through the two intervening weeks as necessary, and when possible to continue to offer their time and energy during Spring and Summer breaks, and our three big events during the year. (Walk to Remember in mid-May, Sumer Fun Day in mid-July and Winter Holiday party in mid-December).

The environment we provide for our families is all about consistency. That means for the volunteer that unless you are contagiously ill or dealing with a crisis in your life, you are expected to be at ALL of your group session meetings. Getting an opportunity to vacation, or go to a concert or wanting to stay home to study for a big test are not reasonable reasons to miss your group. Every time you miss, the clients miss out on your presence in their life that they are relying on. That being said, emergencies do happen and it is YOUR OBLIGATION to get another volunteer to provide coverage if you are going to be out and to brief them on your group, and the dynamics within it.

Q. What do volunteers actually do?

A - Volunteers work collaboratively each night in group. In the children's groups, we keep a ratio of 2 or 3 to one kids to adults to allow for more personal connections and relationships to form. There is a theme set for each month's two meetings. Using those themes, we plan games, arts and crafts, musical activities and physical activities to engage the kids in some of the tasks of coping, and healing through the challenges in their lives. Volunteers working with the kids choose to sign up to be a lead facilitator for as many groups as they would like. Then, working together, the volunteer leads facilitators and Support Group Coordinator create a cohesive plan for playing with the kids and we share that info with all of the other volunteers and each group.

Though some of our games include question and answer, no child is required to reveal or share any part of their story they don't want to share. Being around other kids who are facing similar challenges is most valuable to the children in the program.

In the adult groups, facilitators introduce the theme being used for the month, set a safe and welcoming tone for the group, and manage the group's time to allow all participants to share their issues, needs, and concerns about their family's situation, whether it be illness or death. We use mostly a verbal model, but on occasion, art and other expressive modalities are also utilized in the adult support groups.

It is important to recognize that we are not trying to "fix" these family's sadnesses, but we are choosing to journey with them through the experience and give them tools for managing stress and emotional needs, and integrate those tools into their lives as kids, students and family members. We consider our work to be taking the model of "it takes a village" and putting it into practice. At Circle of Care, our model is that community support for the difficult but natural occurrence of death and loss in our lives is what we provide and we do our best to serve as healing companions for the journey.

Q. How will I know what to say?

A. Your main role as a volunteer is to be an accepting and non-judgmental listener. During the training we will discuss how to be with and talk to children and adults in support groups, how to understand the different issues inherent in grief and trauma, and learning how to develop and to teach coping strategies to manage many kinds of crises these families will deal with over the years that may be affected by illness or loss in their family.

Q - What can a volunteer expect from relationships with clients, other volunteers and staff?

A – Because of the intimate and emotional work that we do here, many of our volunteers develop close connections to fellow facilitators, and participants. We hope that you will see each other and the staff as part of your community. As far as the group participants go, it is important that your relationship with them remain here at Circle of Care. No outside contact, including phone calls or emails is allowed due to legal privacy restrictions to help maintain the supportive environment for both the volunteer and the group participant. It is our Support Group Program Coordinator job to maintain contact with participants in our groups between group meetings etc.