



Promoting Mental Wellness in Virginia

P. O. Box 1248
Charlottesville, VA 22902
www.VocalVirginia.org

*If it's not YOU,
it's someone
you know.*

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YES! I want to partner with VOCAL to help make RECOVERY possible!

Enclosed is a TAX-DEDUCTIBLE contribution of:

\$100* \$75 \$50 \$35 \$25 Other \$ _____

Please know that ANY amount is appreciated!

*Donations of \$100 and over will receive a free copy of *FIREWALKERS: Madness, Beauty and Mystery* when released.

(Note: You can also donate online at www.vocalvirginia.org.)



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(Please provide address on credit card if different from address on left. Make corrections if necessary. Thanks!)

Please send me information on VOCAL membership.
May we have your email address? _____

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Return this form to VOCAL, P. O. Box 1248, Charlottesville, VA 22902 • www.vocalvirginia.org



September 2009

Dear Friend,

One in four of us suffers from some sort of diagnosable mental illness. Most of us know someone with mental health challenges.

Approximately 57.7 million Americans experience a mental health disorder in a given year. In the U.S., the annual cost of mental illness is estimated to be \$79 billion. Adults with serious mental illness who access public services die 25 years younger than other Americans, largely due to treatable medical conditions.

These would be staggering statistics in any economic climate. But today, with so many of us out of work and unable to afford care, the statistics have become downright frightening.

Many Virginians who have experienced mental health challenges are working with what we've got—each other—**through peer-support programs.** Through VOCAL, the statewide organization of people in mental health recovery, **we are transforming the mental health system.** And we are helping each other recover and go on to lead productive lives.

VOCAL is a non-profit **support network, social change movement,** and **self-help education program.** VOCAL was founded in 2000 by (and for) people who have experienced a mental health crisis.

I am writing to you today to ask you to support the work of VOCAL on behalf of mental health consumers in Virginia. Can you make a financial contribution so that we may continue to help people help themselves?

People who have experienced and recovered from mental health crises can help their peers in a unique and cost-effective way. This is known as the “mental health consumer movement” or “peer-run movement,” and it is growing all across the country. Due to its success, the movement has become especially strong in Virginia. **With your help, we can continue reaching out to those with mental health challenges in these troubling times.**

Participation in self-help groups has been found to lessen feelings of isolation, increase practical knowledge, and sustain coping efforts. A number of controlled studies have demonstrated tangible benefits for mental health consumers participating in self-help programs. One study found that participants in peer-run groups reported fewer symptoms and fewer hospitalizations after joining the group. That's why we put together the VOCAL CO-OP, a collective of peer-run grassroots mental

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health programs— we want peer-support programs to become accessible to all Virginians. VOCAL provides support in program development, strategic planning, and other areas of nonprofit management to these peer-run groups and centers in Virginia. These **peer-run programs are accessible, affordable, and focus on self-determination and empowerment.** Peer-run programs help because they are often open on weekends and evenings, times when other mental health programs may be closed—leaving someone in need with nowhere to turn but to a hospital or jail.

As people who have personally experienced mental illness, we respect the inherent worth and dignity of all people, regardless of their current or past mental state, diagnosis, or use of medications. We believe in self-determination—the rights of all of us to have a say in our own mental health care. Those 57 million Americans who will experience a mental health disorder this year should get the opportunity to become educated about their diagnosis and to make choices in their own treatment. They need to understand that **recovery is possible. We are more than our diagnoses.** We can go on to lead fulfilling and productive lives.

Peer-run programs **serve as both a complement and alternative to traditional mental health programs,** helping reach hard-to-reach populations, and helping create a system where all people have choice and option to find the kind of care that works best for them.

The U.S. Surgeon General also acknowledges the contributions of peer-run services. The 2006 document, *Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General*, states, “The emergence of vital consumer and family movements promises to shape the direction and complexion of mental health programs for many years to come. ... Organizations representing consumers have promoted important goals and have invigorated the fields of research as well as treatment and service delivery. Among the principal goals shared by much of the consumer movement is to encourage self-help and a focus on recovery from mental illness.” **Peer-run programs are effective and economical.** The mutual support, information and growth found in a peer-run community are vital to the recovery of those suffering mental illness.

In VOCAL peer-run programs, **people break out of their roles as patients** and into roles as peers, advocates, support people, program organizers, and community leaders.

Here is one VOCAL success story:

Bonnie was diagnosed with a severe mental illness in 1995 after fifteen years of seeking to understand what was happening to her. Homeless, living out of her car, and unable to work, she received Social Security Disability benefits for many years. She counted on Meals on Wheels to bring her food, as she was unable to manage the daily chore of finding food.

Bonnie’s life turned around quickly and dramatically when, in 2005, VOCAL first introduced her to the idea of *mental health recovery*, rather than mere symptom management.

“Someone in recovery told me about people living fulfilling lives, despite various diagnoses. Someone *believed* in me. Someone was willing to use his own story to show me I am not a freak, I was just lost behind my symptoms. What made the difference for me is the mirror I found in my peers. I saw pieces of me in other people’s stories and found hope that *I could change things for myself.*”

Bonnie is now employed, generously shares her story to assist others in their recovery journey, and has become a well-recognized mental health advocate in the Commonwealth of Virginia. She has been described as a “voice of reason” on emotionally charged mental health issues. Perhaps you heard her recently being interviewed on NPR about the new legislation involving Psychiatric Advanced Directives.

Peer-run programs in Virginia serve thousands of individuals who are actively working to ensure their own mental wellness. Given the economic climate, **VOCAL is anticipating a rising demand for mental health services across the state.** We believe that, with the proper funding, we can continue to help connect people in mental health recovery and promote mental wellness. Won't you please join us in this capacity-building effort?

Through our network, VOCAL keeps Virginians informed about upcoming mental health legislation. We actively seek to **include mental health consumers on local boards and decision-making groups.** In the past four months, VOCAL has ensured that mental health consumers have been represented at over 300 advocacy meetings and trainings. Each year, VOCAL conducts approximately 200 outreach presentations on mental health recovery at colleges, universities, churches, Community Service Boards, and hospitals.

Several months ago, a local police department began organizing Crisis Intervention Teams, and one of our mental health advocates presented a portion of the training from the mental health consumer perspective. She says, “As I was leaving, I noticed one of the officers standing out of sight of everyone, but I had to pass by him on my way to the parking lot. He stopped me, with tears in his eyes, and told me part of his own mental health story, and how there is no one with whom he can safely share. I was able to provide him some support and information about recovery. I let him know about recovery programs he could safely participate in without having to disclose his profession. He also would not have to tell about his participation in such a group to his colleagues or superiors. Being able to reach out to him was truly a rewarding experience.” No one but a fellow mental health consumer could have understood that officer's struggles.

By investing in VOCAL with a donation, you can enable this work to continue— you can make a difference. You may not have the time or inclination to go before a board and speak on behalf of mentally ill people in Virginia, but your financial contribution can enable someone to do so.

For the past four years, VOCAL has held annual conferences to **provide opportunities for people in mental health recovery to gather together and learn from each other's experience**. Over 200 people have attended each year, and numbers are steadily increasing. At each annual conference, 25 to 30 workshops are offered by people who have experienced a mental health challenge. One of our most popular workshops informs people about the Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP), a simple **self-help system for identifying personal resources and then using those resources to stay well.**

The conference is always well-received because it provides so many tools for self-help as well as being a great networking opportunity. Here's an email we received after the last conference:

“My sister enjoyed herself so much at the conference that I thought I should thank you and your committee. I heard about the interesting workshops, the friendly people willing to share their experiences, the pleasant surroundings, the good food, and the opportunity to get involved in VOCAL networking. I am very happy that VOCAL was able to fund

and organize this large project for my sister and the hundreds of folks like her. I hope the conference will be held again next year.”

Your contribution will help us continue to **offer conferences and networking events, provide education** about mental health recovery, and **strengthen grass-roots recovery groups** with organizational support.

Here are examples of what your contribution can do:

- \$25 can pay a stipend or travel costs for someone recovering from mental illness to tell their story to a classroom of students studying to become psychologists.
- \$30 pays for one hour of phone support enabling the Executive Director of a peer-run program to receive help with board or staff development, fundraising, grantwriting, program evaluation, or counsel on becoming a 501(c)3.
- \$50 will provide a copy of the VOCAL resource, *The Grant Seeker's Treasure Map & Orienteering Guide: A Guide for Peer-run Mental Health Programs*, to five peer-run mental health programs in Virginia so that they may find grants and be self-sustaining.
- \$100 can cover mileage for peer-run program directors to gather together and share best practices for serving Virginians' needs for peer support.
- \$200 can cover a scholarship for one person to attend VOCAL's 3-day conference in the spring.
- \$600 can provide for the next printing of *Resources for Mental Health Consumers*, a ten-page booklet given to mental health patients being discharged from local hospitals.

Consumer-run programs such as VOCAL receive less than 1% of public mental health funding in Virginia. And you've seen the budget deficit news—the next Governor is going to have to slash funding everywhere. Please send a note to your delegate, senators, and the new Governor begging them NOT to cut mental health funding. If you need help drafting a letter or finding out where it should go, drop us an email at network@vocalvirginia.org.

We need your help TODAY. We can't rely on government funding—and in a spirit of self-determination and self-help, we believe we should make an effort to raise our own operating funds. **Please consider sending us a donation today.** If you have any questions about our work, feel free to give us a call or check out our website at www.vocalvirginia.org. Thank you.

Sincerely,



Ellen M. Osborne
Fundraising Coordinator, VOCAL, Inc.

P. S. — For donations of \$100 or more, we will send you a copy of the soon-to-be-released groundbreaking book, *Firewalkers: Madness, Beauty and Mystery*. *Firewalkers* offers a different way of viewing mental health. What has been labeled *illness* can be a profound, turbulent, spiritual experience that has the power to enrich us, reveal unknown strengths, and transform lives. We want to change the way people feel about mental illness, to offer new ways to understand the journey, and to help change attitudes in our state after the tragedy at Virginia Tech and the subsequent changes in mental health legislation.