

How to Start a Peer-to-Peer Friendship Project (like *The Friendship Squad*)

What is it? The Friendship Squad is a social support project that involves pairing people together who are willing to make new friends and supporting them as they build their friendships. This document can help you to create your own Friendship Project.

- 1. Develop a Website** – I am not a web designer. I hired one and he may be able to help you too. Having a website makes things a lot easier because you can: a) put your project summary there; b) put your applications there, and c) send out clickable links to everyone.
- 2. Write a Summary of Your Project's Purpose** - Ours reads: "The Friendship Squad endeavors to unite individuals with life challenges, particularly those who have encountered mental health, substance abuse, and/or criminal justice systems, by promoting peer-to-peer friendships that generate hope, trust, mutuality, stability, community involvement, and personal growth." The link below says even more:
<https://www.cityvoicesonline.org/friendship-squad-description/>
- 3. Form a Team** - I sent emails and texts and voicemails to people in my network, informing them that I am putting together a friendship project. I sent them links to the project summary. Although most of the work will be done by one or two people, there are some things that require additional help such as getting the word out. I formed a group of advisors to whom I sent biweekly updates emails. I was able to ask them for advice or support when I ran into issues such as high turnover, lack of participation, or trouble finding participants. You may want to seek advice from people who are connected to the

communities that you want to engage. Mainly, you will need help to promote your project to your communities in order to attract volunteers as well as people who can use a friend. I started promoting to an email list of people I had met along my life's journey. Soon, the first volunteer applicants responded. I later used Facebook, which is discussed further down.

4. Make Short & Easy Applications - I did one application for volunteers that you can see here:

<https://www.cityvoicesonline.org/friendship-squad/> And one for friend-seekers that you can see here:

<https://www.cityvoicesonline.org/friendship-squad-friends-quest ionnaire/> Our website allows people to download the applications they fill out as a PDF and the submitted copies are sent to my email address. It also will not allow someone to submit their application until they fill out all of the required fields.

5. Interview the Volunteers - I interviewed volunteers for almost one hour with a set of questions that helped me to determine if their "heart was in the right place." I wanted to make sure that they understood the purpose of the project, their role, and to see if they had the ability to create gentle boundaries and handle challenging situations, among other things. See Appendix A for some of those questions and feel free to modify or add your own.

6. Attracting Volunteers & Friends - In addition to contacting my network, I used Facebook to find both volunteers and friend-seekers. I spread the word among friends and colleagues that I was seeking volunteers. I created flyers on Canva.com and reached out to peer specialists, my friends, people on zoom groups, and people I met at conferences. I

started by gathering the volunteers first. After I interviewed and accepted about 10 volunteers, I asked them to be patient as I began looking for people who wanted friends. Limitations for our project include the necessity to understand English as well as having access to phones, Internet, and/or computers. Volunteers and friends can be from any English-speaking country as long as they have the means to communicate. I created a Friends flyer that I posted on Facebook, allowing me to find people who wanted friends. It took time. In the beginning, it was a lot easier to find volunteers than it was to find Friends.

7. Pairing Volunteers with Friends - This is a lot of fun. I studied the applications of both the volunteers and friends. You should be able to recall some of the things said to you in the volunteer interviews and from the conversations you've had with friend-seekers. This will all inform your pairings. I send the volunteer's application (minus contact info) to the friend and the friend's application (minus contact info) to the volunteer and ask them if they feel comfortable with the match. The next step is to introduce them to each other in an email, encourage them to share contact info, and they would take it from there.

8. Agreements for Volunteers & Friends - Our agreements ask volunteers and friends to communicate with each other for at least one hour every two weeks and to commit to the project for at least six months. Ideally, friendships will outlast project commitments. I see the project as helping friendships to take root and grow into long-lasting friendships. You will find that agreements are not always followed to the tee, so be prepared to compromise. See Appendix B for a sample agreement.

- 9. Biweekly Check-Ins with Volunteers and Friends** – I check in with volunteers and friends on a biweekly basis to hear how things are going. I text and email them and, in some cases, call them, or Facebook them. If a volunteer is having an issue with their friend or vice versa, I help them to work it out, keeping both perspectives in mind. Sometimes disagreements happen; sometimes a friend can “rub you the wrong way.” It is important to check-in because they will not come to you with their friendship challenges. If either of the friends are still not pleased with their friendship, despite many attempts at meditation, then they will have the option of a new match or to step away from the project. This sometimes happens, but don’t be discouraged for there will also be friendships that flourish. Note: You do not have to be a professional mediator. This project will teach you through practice how to hold space and listen non-judgmentally.
- 10. Stay Organized** - I used Windows to create a folder for The Friendship Squad and inside that folder, I kept files and created other folders for volunteers, Friends, promotional flyers, spreadsheets, Word docs, you name it. I used Excel to organize the volunteers and friends with notes on relationship status, whether they were having difficulties, last point of contact, etc.
- 11. Evaluations** - After nine months, I sent out a survey to 10 volunteers to see how they felt about the project. One of our advisors helped me to do the survey using his software, but SurveyMonkey.com is just as good. Make sure that you save the results to see where your project is strong and where improvements can be made. Appendix C has a page from the

volunteer survey. For the full survey, you can contact me. And of course, you are free to modify it as you see fit.

12. Free Assistance with Your Project! - Feel free to contact me (Dan Frey) with questions, concerns, or even for emotional support as you engage in this valuable activity with its potential to enhance human lives through friendship. You can call or text (929) 884-3564 or email cityvoices1995@gmail.com - I sincerely look forward to hearing from you ♥

Appendix A

The Friendship Squad (TFS) Interview Questions

You can be open and honest when responding during this interview and you can skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

General

*What is your understanding of our project?

Compassion

*Tell us about a time when you were sensitive or compassionate to a person in an emotional or tense situation.

*When making new friends, have you ever created boundaries that you didn't want crossed, especially early in the friendship? Tell us about it.

General

*Let's role play how you would "shoot the breeze" or engage in small talk with a friend....

Trust

*Tell us what steps you take to build trust with new friends?

*Tell us about some of your most meaningful friendships.

*Describe a situation where you helped motivate someone to improve their life

Compassion

*How would you respond when you realize that a friend is clinging to you for emotional support? (calling/texting a lot, finding it hard to leave you alone)

*How do you respond to a person experiencing psychosis or an altered state of being?

*Did you ever have a time when you needed a friend and didn't have one?

Responsibility (Ownership for consequences)

*Tell us about a time when you made a significant mistake with a friend.

*Tell us about a time when your patience was tested by a friend.

Appendix B

The Friendship Squad Volunteer Agreement

As a volunteer you agree to....

- discuss with your friend the best times to speak
- talk and/or text with your friend for at least one hour every two weeks if possible
- commit at least 6 months to The Friendship Squad and to the friend you have made through it
- If you decide to drop out before the 6 months are up, please provide closure with your Friend and with the project director
- meet with Dan Frey or the project director as needed for assistance
- hold space with your friend and listen at least as much as you talk
- contact your friend at least 24 hours in advance if you can't make a chat
- set boundaries as needed in a gentle way
- Do not accept any gifts and gently explain that this goes against our policy
- Do not give your friend any money or gifts
- contact Dan Frey or the project director if you feel that you cannot build a friendship with the person you are matched with
- contact Dan Frey or the project director if something inappropriate happened while chatting with your friend that you are having trouble dealing with
- contact Dan Frey or the project director if your friend has not been responding to your messages, texts and/or voicemails for over a week
- contact Dan Frey or the project director if your friend is in crisis and/or expressing suicidal and/or homicidal intentions

Print Name: _____

Signed,

Date: _____

Appendix C

How many hours per week do you speak with your TFS friend?

How do you communicate with your TFS friend?

- Phone
- Text
- Zoom or similar
- Something else

Do you plan to stay in touch with your TFS friend after your 6-months with TFS is completed?

- Yes
- Unsure
- No

Are you receiving the support you need from TFS staff and volunteers to help maintain your TFS friendship?

- Yes
- Unsure
- No

Would you recommend the experience of volunteering for TFS to someone else?



FAQ & RESOURCES

Q: What's the point in doing this? What do I get out of it?

A: You might score points with Jesus, Moses, Muhammed or Buddha and ascend into a beautiful heavenly realm after you die. Or, maybe here on Earth, you will experience warm, loving feelings as you see the good you have done for fellow human beings. Yes, there will be frustrations and challenges, but only through these can we grow. You will gain many valuable skills like: enhanced social skills, project coordination skills, supervisory, organizational, research and social media skills to name a few. You will be getting to know volunteers and participants and they can become your friends just as they are friends with each other. Building community is what we are doing and it is so important for people to feel connected and supported by a community. “No person is an island.” And you are not alone. I am committed to supporting you with this valuable work, every step of the way.

Q: How do I promote the project on social media?

A: I used Facebook mainly. My Facebook friends all know people with mental health and/or substance use challenges as well as a number of peer support workers. I simply asked them: a) if they know anyone who would like to volunteer and b) if they know anyone with life challenges who could use a supportive friend. I created a group on Facebook for The Friendship Squad where I posted flyers, inspirational quotes, and related information. Success doesn't happen overnight. You've got to commit to make it happen, “show up,” “roll with the punches,” and see the thing through. I am here for you to call upon as a free consultant, making myself available for you. Just leave a message, an email, or a text and I will get back to you and we'll work on this together.

<https://www.score.org/> - SCORE is group of retired business professionals that offer free business consultations for a period of time

<https://relationshipsproject.org/about/> - This project was also founded to help people to build and maintain meaningful relationships.

https://www.madinamerica.com/2020/03/survivor-led-mutual-aid-projects/?mc_cid=20dc6d90c0&mc_eid=3748861603 – “Psychiatric survivor-led mutual aid projects thrive during the times of crisis” from Mad in America.