



Understanding ACA's National Peer Network

by NLLIC Staff
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What is a Peer Network?

A peer network is a number of experienced, trained amputees linked through one or more organizations who provide emotional and informational support to new amputees and their families. Peers make contact through personal visitation, when possible, and by phone, email, FAX and surface mail.

What is the Purpose of a Peer Network?

Full understanding of the amputation experience and recovery process is intrinsic to the amputee. Trained peers help new amputees jump-start their transition to a new life by sharing information, by serving as a model of success, and by offering understanding and support.

What Kind of Training do Peers Receive?

Experienced amputees who have successfully made the transition to their new life are the best candidates for fulfilling the job of peer visitor. Training techniques encompass:

- Presenting an appropriate demeanor
- Understanding the stages of grief and loss
- Communication techniques
- Promoting emotional recovery
- Listening skills
- Dealing with difficult issues
- Using the Internet and videos
- Communication beyond words
- Continued contact & communication.

How it Works

The dictionary defines “network” as a system of interconnected communication terminals, and “networking” as the development of contacts for the exchange of information to further a specific goal. The Amputee Coalition of America’s (ACA) National Peer Network fits this definition. Their team of information specialists maintains an information center and communication system where contact is available via phone, fax, email and/or surface mail.

Calls and Requests

Incoming requests for information or assistance are documented and forwarded to information specialists and an ACA outreach coordinator for processing.

ACA currently has volunteer regional representatives who are also experienced support group leaders. These individuals are located throughout the U.S. and communicate with groups in regions varying in size, usually between six to nine surrounding states. Regional representatives have knowledge of new groups and special group activities forming in their region (e.g., sports, socials, lectures, educational) and can readily identify special interest support groups on request. Information specialists, the outreach coordinator, and regional representatives offer referrals to amputee support groups located nearest to the inquirer location.

ACA information specialists supply a range of information services including contact information for service providers, medical facilities, Centers for Independent Living, state and national associations, and much more. Amputees or their family members who contact ACA receive a free copy of *inMotion* magazine and ACA's general packet. The packet includes information on the National Limb Loss Information Center, which is sponsored in part through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It also includes updates on ACA's Annual Meetings and schedules for Peer Training Seminars.

The ACA created and maintains an ever-growing database of trained and experienced amputee peers who are willing to communicate by phone, fax, e-mail, postal service, or (when possible) personal visits. Each year the ACA provides eight to 10 peer training seminars, adding to the number of qualified peers in the network. Amputees are matched as closely as possible to fellow amputees who have experienced similar limb loss and are of comparable age.

The ACA's outreach coordinator is an experienced support group leader who serves as an additional source of information for those seeking peer contacts or advice on starting or maintaining support groups. Local support groups are an important link between new amputees, volunteer services, and trained peer contacts, enabling connections to, and networking with, ACA's national resources, educational materials, and peer training programs. Local groups are knowledgeable pertaining to state, city and local matters, while the ACA provides access and expertise on the national level.

Communication is Vital

The ACA encourages all support groups to be in communication with the coalition and to aid the staff in maintaining current information on all existing groups. Routinely, the ACA contacts support groups nationwide in an effort to maintain the latest information on points of contact, meeting times, locations and programs; the goal of which is to ensure successful cooperation and accurate referrals. The ACA also works collaboratively with support groups to provide peer training, experienced trainers, training manuals, possible funding sources, and educational materials.

Groups are asked to make their members, local facilities and other contacts aware of the ACA and to urge them to become a part of the ACA's national database and networking system. Working side by side to increase services for those who have experienced limb loss, the local support groups and the

ACA strive to present a collaborative and united face to the general public, supporting legislative and disability issues that encompass common goals.

All amputees, support groups and professional contacts represent a vital link to the maintenance and perseverance of this communication network.

Amputees, family members, medical providers, orthotic and prosthetic facilities, physical therapists, rehabilitation units, hospitals, state Vocational Rehabilitation centers, Centers for Independent Living, all related nonprofit organizations, disability services and interested individuals, **each of you are a needed and a vital part of this network.** You are the dedicated, empowered human beings who *are* the ACA's communication terminals. The ACA is reaching out to you: **YOU**, who gives the network life—**YOU**, who makes the ACA National Peer Network a living, breathing entity.