

PeerNetBC.com expands self-help to the web

The Self-Help Resource Association (SHRA), supported by VCH's SMART Fund, has just launched PeerNetBC.com as a complement to its face-to-face services.

Since 1986, SHRA has been facilitating the growth and development of self-help groups, peer support initiatives, networks, and resources. The hundreds of groups and individuals it serves focus on health, cross-cultural and ethno-specific issues, or addiction, abuse and mental health issues.

"We're really excited about the look and usability of PeerNetBC.com," says **Mebrat Beyene**, executive director of SHRA. "We've designed it to be accessible to people who aren't web savvy and haven't used online support before. We're initially walking clients through it in person to ensure they're comfortable."

PeerNetBC offers:

- A collection of resources
- Access for community support groups to start either open or closed online discussions on general or specific topics (closed discussions have security measures to ensure privacy)
- Online workshops.

SHRA began planning the site three years ago and created a steering committee of people from various organizations involved in self-help and peer support. Their insights have helped with challenges such as how to engage marginalized populations.

Nythalah Baker of the BC Rural Women's Network helped address issues around accessibility, confidentiality, and safety. "PeerNetBC has the potential to really help decrease isolation and get people involved with topics that have a direct relevance to their lives," she says.

Another advisor has been **Merlyn Horton** of the Safe On-Line Outreach Society, which focuses on youth. She sees PeerNetBC as a way to begin to use the web therapeutically. "We need sites like this that can offer a counterbalance to some of the exploitive activities on the Internet," says Horton.

Beyene says SHRA aims to have 10 to 15 online support groups started within 2006/2007. "It's a great time to be expanding our services online," says Beyene. "We know we'll be able to reach more people this way."

Visit PeerNetBC at www.PeerNetBC.com.

For more information about SHRA, call 604-733-6186 or visit www.selfhelpresource.bc.ca.

For more information about the SMART Fund, visit www.smartfund.ca.

VCH's SMART Fund

Founded in 1997, the SMART Fund supports non-profit agencies across the VCH region. The fund focuses on projects that empower communities to better identify and manage their own health needs – a focus that aligns well with VCH's commitment to promote informed choice, involvement, and self-responsibility.

"We get involved with organizations that are promoting health and wellness and encouraging marginalized and vulnerable members of the community to play an active role in their own health," says **Peter Bruckmann**, SMART Fund community developer.

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