Service and Program Awards Application Cover Sheet

Category: Lived Experience Leadership

Entry Title: e-Friend: National Online Peer Support Network

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Organisation: Independent Community Living Australia
Additional Information about Entry (1 x A4 page).

The mental health care system is made up of a widely diverse group of stakeholders including different and diverse service users/consumers and communities, different organisations, governing bodies, and jurisdictions as well as many different professional groups. The increase demand and diverse needs on mental health services in Australia particularly over the past 2 years, means the lived experience workforce has the potential to contribute to the wider mental health system of care.

In recent years, studies have illustrated that a lived experience peer workforce is a complementary service option to many clinical and community services that supports the insights to a personal journey of recovery, for any individual who may be experiencing an episode of mental ill-health. (Shalaby R, Agyapong V. 2020). The lived experience peer workforce can provide better recovery outcomes for individuals and increase capacity of the mental health system. (Solomon, P. 2004).

eFriend is the first virtual peer support service in Australia funded by Australian Government as part of the special mental health package announced by the Minister for Health Greg Hunt, in response to COVID-19 in early 2020. This funding was provided over 2 years as proof of concept to scale up a peer support service to support individuals in the broader community who may be experiencing isolation, loneliness, and distress.

Reference: see promotional video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O0ee1GLnYA8

eFriend complements support lines and services delivered by other community services and mental health organisations nationally and builds upon ICLA’s 30 years of expertise and experience in delivering in-community support for people living with mental illness.

eFriend service is consistent with the national mental health commission – National Lived Experience (Peer) workforce development guidelines (and its Roadmap).

As mentioned in these guidelines:

- “A diverse Lived Experience workforce assists individual organisations and wider sector to better meet the needs of people with different experiences, identification and backgrounds”

- “A well supported Lived Experience workforce can result in benefits for people accessing services, families, social networks and organisations as well as broader communities”

The eFriend service is operated via an online secure and private interactive medium at no cost to the public. This includes an online appointment platform that allows continuity of care with the same peer workers over the timeframe.

ICLA eFriend (www.icla.org.au/efriend) has developed a strong peer network that can connect and respond to the needs of diverse communities, Australia wide. It was established with a key focus on developing and enhancing the lived experience, peer workforce with specific skills sets associated with a CHIME recovery framework. (Leamy, M. et.al. 2011)

eFriend started to operate 2 years ago delivering close to 4000 sessions. Delivering services across all states and territories, reaching rural and remote communities, connecting with people across the lifespan (from young adults to the elderly)

The BlackDog institute, has completed evaluation of the eFriend program with very favourable outcomes and strong business case for its impact. The evaluation includes reviewing eFriend and peer work online effectiveness and impact across all Australian communities. Stage 1 of this evaluation has been completed (available ICLA website https://icla.org.au/news-resources/ )
1. **Evidence of a significant contribution to the field of mental health on a local, state or national level.**

eFriend has made an outstanding contribution to the field of mental health by establishing the first national lived experience peer support worker, online service in Australia. It has demonstrated that a well-supported peer support workforce can provide lived experience insights to compliment and add value to the mental health system in Australia.

Participation in and engagement with the eFriend program has grown steadily throughout the 2-year period. With exponential increase in demand since the program was established. We are currently receiving close to 500 appointments booking per month.

Over the past year eFriend has been able to provide services across key demographics and geography. The graphs below outline our broad reach across age, sex, and geographical location amongst participants who provided us with their demographic information at registration:

The Black Dog institute evaluation of the eFriend service demonstrates that this service is effective, efficient, and importantly relevant to the needs of mental health consumes in Australia.
2. Evidence of innovation and/or recognised best practice.

ICLA pioneered eFriend (2020) - the first online peer support service in Australia - a national program that connects people with mental health concerns to peer support workers with lived experience with mental health conditions.

We have an operational framework and online platform which facilitate video conferencing, telephone and online chat, appointment scheduling, 24/7 rostering, payroll, peer matching, supervision & on-call support.

ICLA has developed the eFriend model to increase the access of people who need mental health support to engage with a lived experience peer worker. We have established a platform that facilitates the public to engage with a recognised and credential peer worker, thereby supporting the lived experience awareness and the value to the recovery journey.

Importantly ICLA virtual platform also allows for an increase and diversifying the peer workforce across Australia. This allows a greater diversity in matching lived experience and developing a workforce that can complement existing professional services and mental health workforces.

Around 60% of ICLA’s staff are bi-lingual. Our eFriend service demonstrates effective engagement with diverse populations from every State/Territory, including >20% of participants from rural/regional areas. The evaluation found “participants showed a high level of satisfaction across the demographic categories”.

The Black Dog Institute agreed to conduct a two-phase process and outcome evaluation for the eFriend program. Phase I of the eFriend Program evaluation was to describe the scope of the program’s activities, and to produce learnings to improve the program implementation. The two domains of the data collection were participation and implementation. It was decided to also include some short-term outcome domains in Phase I of the evaluation.

The findings of the evaluation showed that participants in the eFriend program consisted of those aged 18 years and over that are lonely or feeling isolated. The program achieved high levels of satisfaction for participants. It performed well in client onboarding and the delivery of lived experience. The program did not perform as well in the areas of delivering peer sessions over video due to issues with technology and the processes around ending the peer relationship.

The Peer Support Workers (PSWs) reported a strong commitment to both participants and eFriend Program. PSWs developed deep, satisfying relationships with participants in the program based on their lived experience. They reported that they found it easy to develop these relationships and felt safe and empowered in their role as a PSW to do so.

Participants showed a high level of satisfaction of the program across all demographic categories. They expressed deep gratitude for the program and the hope that it was being promoted extensively so that other people facing challenges could access it. Participants felt they had been supported and listened to and valued having someone’s lived experience being shared with them. Participants felt understood and that they had connected with someone.
3. Evidence of participation of mental health consumers in the planning, implementation and evaluation of mental health service delivery. Evidence of prioritising increased level of engagement and influence of consumers and where higher-level participation such as authentic co-design is highly favoured.

eFriend is a fully peer led program, and all staff (including our Shift Supervisors and Team Leaders) have lived experience of being mental health consumers. Lived experience voices have been central to the planning, implementation and evaluation of the eFriend program. eFriend was initially conceptualised as a face to face model, co-designed in collaboration with Roses in the Ocean, Australia’s leading lived experience of suicide organisation. ICLA engaged Roses in the Ocean in 2019 to co-design the initial service model framework and provide initial training for our eFriend Peer Support Workers and Peer Team Leader. The initial service model was based on established peer designed models from the United States and United Kingdom.

When COVID-19 hit in early 2020, in order to ensure ongoing service delivery, ICLA leadership collaborated with the eFriend peers to co-design and implement the current virtual model of service delivery. As eFriend is a peer led program, mental health consumers are involved at all levels of service delivery, including the provision of frontline support, staff supervision, mentoring and development, social media marketing, continuous quality improvement, incident management, and more.

In 2020 when ICLA partnered with the Black Dog Institute to perform an evaluation of the implementation and outcomes of the program, we made clear that we wanted consumer voices to be centred at every stage. Both eFriend Peer Support Workers and eFriend participants were surveyed and interviewed by Black Dog to inform the Evaluation Report and then our Peer Team Leader collaborated with ICLA leadership to implement the report’s recommendations. After the evaluation phase was complete, ICLA leadership collaborated with Black Dog and our Peer Team Leader to develop and implement an internal monitoring and evaluation plan for the program.

Annex 1 - Program Logic Model
Annex 2 - Data Collection Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
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| Participation  | • Client and PSW demographics  
|                |   o Age range of participants  
|                |   o Gender of participants  
|                |   o Indigenous status of participants  
|                |   • Participant location (state/territory; urban/rural/remote)  
|                | • Client risk level (as assessed by PSWs)  
|                | • Client current and past involvement in MH or crisis services           | • Client survey  
|                | • PSW survey                                                              | • Client survey          |
| Implementation | • # of client enrolments, information sessions, peer support sessions  
|                | • # of risk assessments, safety plans, referrals  
|                | • Description of professional development, supervision of PSWs  
|                | • PSW turnover                                                            | • Program data           |
|                | • Client and PSW satisfaction with program  
|                | • Facilitators and barriers to implementation                            | • Client survey  
|                | • PSW survey                                                              | • PSW survey  
|                | • Peer worker interviews                                                  | • Peer worker interviews |

4. Evidence of partnerships and linkages with all key stakeholders (collaboration for continuity between organisations).

In addition to the partnerships with Roses in the Ocean and the Black Dog Institute highlighted in question 3, ICLA have collaborated with a number of organisations and projects in relation to the eFriend program.

In May 2020 eFriend was highlighted by Christine Morgan, CEO of the National Mental Health Commission as an important new platform to meet the mental health challenges faced by the Australian community in the face of COVID-19. eFriend was also highlighted in the commission’s 2020 National Report monitoring mental health and suicide prevention reform.

Reference: See launch video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R2CwhqUzlJY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R2CwhqUzlJY)

To facilitate eFriend’s pivot to a virtual model of service delivery in 2020, ICLA engaged Katberg Tech to develop the eFriend website and online booking platform. Katberg Tech continues to be a major partner of eFriend, collaborating with our eFriend Peer Team Leader and ICLA leadership to optimise eFriend’s reach through a targeted social media advertising and marketing strategy.

During the July 2021 Greater Sydney COVID-19 lockdown, eFriend contributed to the development of South East Sydney Local Health District’s Safehaven program, part of NSW Health’s Toward’s Zero Suicides initiative. Safehaven is a peer-centred, hospital alternative drop-in centre for individuals experiencing suicidal ideation, and ICLA leadership and the eFriend Peer Team Leader provided advice and expertise on how to develop their model towards virtual service delivery during the lockdown.
eFriend and ICLA leadership have also contributed expertise to the research and co-design phases of the Black Dog Institute’s Under the Radar project, which aims to design an effective and sustainable model of care for people experiencing suicidal thoughts, who are not in contact with clinical mental health services.

5. Verification of effectiveness (quality improvement activity, data collection and its use, including graphs and tables, achievement of performance indicators, e.g. attendance figures, outcome measures, number of document downloads, page views, click through rates etc).

At the end of the most recent reporting period (July 1 2021 – December 31 2021) eFriend had reached over 660 individuals across Australia. On average there were 28 new participants registered every week. The number of referrals to eFriend, social media engagement, and new registrations are monitored in weekly meetings and tracked with assistance from our digital marketing partner Katberg Tech. eFriend staff maintain NSW and National Service Directories on the eFriend website which staff can refer participants to during calls to assist with self-referral. Through the period these were downloaded 128 times. Engagement on Facebook was high throughout the reporting period, with on average over 8000 reactions, comments, shares, or clicks per month, and 193 visits per month to the eFriend blog page through the reporting period.

A process evaluation of the eFriend program was undertaken by ICLA and the Black Dog Institute in early 2021, which described the scope of the program in terms of how the program was being delivered, participant characteristics and participant and peer support worker (PSW) satisfaction with the program. The evaluation also measured short-term outcomes in terms of changes in skills, knowledge and attitudes of participants and PSWs.

To what extent are participants satisfied with eFriend?
When asked how satisfied they were with the eFriend program, over 85% of participants surveyed said they were either extremely or very satisfied with the program. See graph below.

The evaluation report for was finalised in late 2021 and highlighted the following strengths of the program:
- 70% of participants gave comments of praise and gratitude and expressed the wish that more people could access such a peer program:
- Over 85% of participants surveyed said they were either extremely or very satisfied with the program.
• After the end of their eFriend sessions, 85% of participants reported feeling significantly more hopeful and optimistic; 79% were feeling more confident; and 70% were feeling more empowered.

• Participants expressed high levels of satisfaction with both peer workers and the eFriend program overall.

• Participants expressed deep gratitude for both the program and their peer workers.

• Participants found that they easily formed a connection with their peer workers and maintained a strong connection with them throughout their time in the program, based on the delivery of lived experience. 

• Participants looked forward to their weekly connection with their peer worker, felt like they had been listened to, and that someone was caring for them. This is consistent with literature that states that peer workers are effective in building trusting relationships (Reper and Carter, 2011) and empathising directly and immediately with participants (Davidson et al, 2012).

• Peer workers reported great team culture and excellent rapport with participants.

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In late 2021 ICLA again collaborated with Black Dog to design and develop the eFriend Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Plan, in order to document the approach taken to monitoring and evaluating the program and to describe relevant tools and processes used. The aim was to improve the ongoing implementation of the eFriend program based on evidence to ensure the Program is meeting prescribed outputs and short-term outcomes. The M&E Plan will provide the eFriend team with an ongoing framework for continuing measurement of the participation and implementation of the Program and the short-term outcomes that are being met. The M&E Plan provides an overarching theory of change for the program with a program logic model; accompanying indicators for specific activities, outputs, and outcomes of the logic model; data collection tools to collect data on the indicators that have been set; specific approaches to reflect and learn in a participatory manner with the eFriend team. The plan was finalised earlier this year and is due to be implemented in the second half of 2022.
References:


Conclusion (1/2 x A4 page).

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Referees (1/2 x A4 page).

Appendix of Support Material (max. 8 x A4 pages).

- Brochure of efriend
- FAQ eFriend Flyer
- Black Dog Institute – eFriend evaluation (Copy found at https://icla.org.au/news-resources/)
So what is this peer support stuff all about?

It’s a question we hear quite often here at eFriend, and we don’t blame you for being a bit confused! Peer support is a relatively new model of providing support, and many people haven’t come across these terms before.

In this guide, we want to explain some important points about our service without the jargon or theoretical concepts, and let you know what to expect from a call with an eFriend peer.

We’ve been there too.

As peer workers, eFriend peer use our own lived experience with mental health struggles, along with additional training, to support people in their recovery process. This lived experience gives us the ability to better empathize, listen and validate your emotions, because while we won’t have stood in your shoes, we have walked down similar paths.

Our model is non-clinical.

This means that eFriend peers are not psychologists, psychiatrists, or doctors, and we don’t have the specialized training required to support people who are currently in acute crisis. In cases where we cannot support your specific needs safely, we can provide you with referral pathways to services that are more suitable. This is of utmost importance, as providing support without adequate training can lead to traumatization, which is the last thing we want.

It’s all about you.

While a peer relationship is built on mutual trust and vulnerability, your eFriend peer is there to support you, not just to talk about themselves.

Typically, your eFriend peer will only bring up parts of their own story when it is helpful and relevant to your goals. That can be as simple as forming a connection or validating your experience, or more specific such as describing a coping technique that worked well for them.
Follow your own path.

An eFriend peer won’t tell you what to do with your life or give you “the answers” to your problems. We know that sometimes it feels comforting to have others take away the burden of decision making, but ultimately this only makes it harder to do for ourselves.

We also understand that sometimes we know the next logical steps to take, but just can’t find the energy or motivation to take them.

As peer workers, it’s our job to support you in taking healthy responsibility for yourself, but also being gentle with yourself and taking life at your own pace.

You don’t need a mental health diagnosis or referral.

Ensuring your safety.

If at any point during your conversation with your eFriend peer they find some information concerning (such as graphic details about a traumatic event or risk of suicide) they have a duty of care to escalate the matter to their supervisor and/or team leader to ensure your well-being and safety.

When we're feeling lonely or stressed, especially in the aftermath of the pandemic, a kind listener can make the difference between coping and falling into a downward spiral. We want to validate that these unprecedented times have caused a lot of stress financially, socially and emotionally, and give you the chance to get these feelings off your chest before they turn into bigger issues.

Mental health is not one-size-fits-all.

Try to keep in mind that while your eFriend peer may talk about a certain support, they’ve found helpful, it might not help you at all. And that’s okay! Your eFriend peer will be supporting you to figure out what strategies can be useful for self-care in your recovery, not preaching about one particular method that we used. We offer suggestions not prescriptions.

Focus on emotions over symptoms.

As peer workers, we cannot guarantee an in-depth knowledge of every single mental illness. Even if you happen to have some diagnose as your eFriend peer, you might still have very different experiences. With this in mind, we will often try to understand what emotions, thoughts or feelings come up for you, instead of jumping to conclusions about how particular symptoms might feel. As eFriend, we want to learn and better understand, so don’t be afraid to explain!

Keep it civil.

Just because your eFriend peer will be providing a safe space for you to open up, it doesn’t give participants the excuse to make sexist, racist, or homophobic comments. It is also unacceptable to use abusive or inappropriate language. In these cases, you may be given a warning or the call may be terminated immediately.

We’re not Tinder.

The eFriend program is not a service for making new pen pals, friends or dates. While we do use mutual relationships to support our participants, this is a relationship with clear boundaries that does not extend outside your scheduled eFriend calls. As peer support workers, we can’t hang out with you on the weekend, but we can provide a lending ear to help you feel heard and supported during tough times.
How do I book?

Just head to [efriend.org.au](http://efriend.org.au) and click the "Book a Call" button. From there, you'll be asked to provide some personal details, and then invited to book an introductory call.

On our booking platform, you will be able to see all the available times and dates to choose from. Our team is open from Monday - Friday, 8:30am - 8pm, and each call is allocated 30 minutes. Simply select the day and time that works best for you.

Once you're booked in, we'll send you a confirmation email to make sure you're ready to go.

If you have any trouble with the booking system, please email us on [info@efriend.org.au](mailto:info@efriend.org.au).
Are you feeling down, stressed, lonely, isolated or worried?

**EFRIEND IS HERE TO HELP**

eFriend peer support workers have our own experience of mental health struggles, so we don't judge. We’re here to chat over phone, video or online chat sessions – to listen, empathise, validate and provide hope.

"I believe this service is incredibly valuable and I have referred other people to it after having such a positive experience myself." - eFriend Participant

**HOW DOES IT WORK?**

- eFriend sessions go for 30 mins each.
- Sessions are booked at least 1 day in advance.
- You can receive up to 15 calls - usually scheduled weekly but can be customised.
- After your intro call, you will speak to the same eFriend peer each week - no need to repeat your story every time!

**WHO IS IT FOR?**

If you're over 18 and living in Australia, we're ready to chat!

Don't worry, there are no hidden costs involved. The eFriend program is funded by the Australian Federal Government and is 100% free for participants over the entire program.

In a recent evaluation of eFriend completed by the Black Dog Institute, over 85% of participants surveyed said they were either extremely or very satisfied with the program.

**WHAT HAPPENS IN AN EFRIEND SESSION?**

After you complete your introductory call, eFriend sessions are fairly open-ended and will look different according to your individual needs. You might use your time to:

- Vent about a difficult situation to an empathetic ear.
- Brainstorm ideas to help create more social connections.
- Ask your peer questions about the process of seeing a psychologist.
- Share new self-care strategies that you and your peer are trying.
- Build up your confidence to seek out further supports.
- Start a positive new habit using your peer as an accountability partner.

Please note: eFriend is a non-clinical service, we do not offer crisis support or mental health treatment.