

BURN UNIT USES PEER SUPPORT TO BROADEN CONTINUUM OF CARE



Fuenning is hospital's lead coordinator for SOAR program.

“They have to be mostly healed, both physically and emotionally, so they can be a resource to those that are in the thick of recovery.”

It's long been established that victims of severe burns can expect highly skilled clinical care when they arrive at University of Colorado Hospital. As the only hospital in the state to earn verification from the American Burn Association (ABA), UCH still provides a wide range of intensive treatment and recovery services.

But the hospital is ready to draw on a new resource for care: burn patients themselves.

On April 1, it plans to launch a program that taps burn survivors to aid those still struggling with recovery. Called “Survivors Offering Assistance in Recovery,” or SOAR, the peer-support program already has eight volunteers who have completed required training and are ready to use their insights and experiences aid to lend a helping hand at UCH.

Forty-two U.S. hospitals offer the SOAR program, which was developed in 2001 by the Grand Rapids, Mich.-based Phoenix Society, a national support organization founded in 1977 by a burn survivor.

Katie Fuenning, burn outreach coordinator with the UCH's Burn/Trauma ICU and the SOAR program's lead coordinator, began recruiting volunteers in January after she attended an ABA meeting and completed training with the Phoenix Society herself. She says volunteers must possess more than a willingness to help others.

Source of strength. All volunteers must be at least one year “out of injury,” she explains. “They have to be mostly healed, both physically and emotionally, so they can be a resource to those that are in the thick of recovery.”

Continued

“The process requires extensive screening.”

Burn survivors who expressed interest in participating in SOAR – some came from the hospital’s burn support group – completed an application, submitted letters of reference and sat down for an interview with Wendy Clyne, PsyD, psychologist for the Burn Unit.

“The process requires extensive screening,” Fuenning says. “Some volunteers might not be ready emotionally [to work with patients].”



SOAR program volunteers Devin Barnhart (left) and Paul Marek during role-play that was part of their peer support training.

Bridging the gap. Those selected completed a full day of SOAR training that focused on communicating with patients who may be in severe physical and emotional distress. “They work on how to communicate – what to say and what not to say,” Fuenning says.

For example, peer support does not include giving medical or psychological advice. “They can say, ‘Here is what worked for me, but you need to talk to the nurse,’” Fuenning explains. “And they are instructed to tell someone right away if it appears a patient is feeling extremely depressed or even suicidal.”

The training also uses role-playing to give volunteers practice in handling a typical situation, such as working with a patient who is overwhelmed with sadness and doesn’t want to talk. “We work on how to get the ‘patient’ to open up,” Fuenning says, “and give [the volunteers] feedback.”

Part of the team. After the training, volunteers complete orientation with the hospital’s Volunteer Office, undergo a health screen and get an identification badge. Three of the eight have finished the entire process thus far, and are ready to go, Fuenning reports.

Sessions between a peer supporter and patient will also follow a standard process, she says. If a patient or family member needs support, staff in the Burn Unit, Burn Clinic and the Rehabilitation Unit will page Fuenning, who will then work with the patient’s nurse and selected peer supporter to schedule a visit. The volunteer will check in with the charge nurse on the unit before the visit, get a briefing on what to expect, complete written feedback after the visit, and page Fuenning for a follow-up conversation to ensure full documentation.

The SOAR program, Fuenning concludes, is a part of the hospital’s broadening continuum of care for burn victims.

“This is what being an ABA-verified hospital means,” she says. “We’re trying to help patients with the best burn support available. The program is part of our comprehensive care.”