

Crisis Center Staff/Volunteer Selection Guidance

Creating an intentional and effective recruitment and selection process for crisis counselors is vital for crisis center operations. Choosing the wrong candidates can result in high turnover, as well as inadequate or even harmful services for individuals in crisis. The following is guidance on how to create a process for adding the right people to your team.

988 Lifeline staff requirements

- The Lifeline does not require specific education levels or specialties of crisis counselors. It is, however, expected that all crisis counselors receive thorough training in relevant crisis intervention skills and suicide assessment/safety planning prior to answering Lifeline contacts.

Strategic planning

- Be mindful about the needs of your program. Are there certain skills, traits, personalities, etc. that are specific to the position and will add to your mission? What can be taught to new hires/volunteers, and what needs to already be ingrained?
- Once you determine your must-haves, design your application and interview questions based on assessing for these.
- Create a clear job description, which is reiterated during the interview process.
- Be transparent with applicants regarding what skills/qualities you're looking for in a crisis counselor. Consider including it on recruitment material/website, in the application, etc.

Recruitment of volunteers and staff

- Promote employment and volunteer opportunities just as you promote your center as a resource to the community.
- Encourage your current volunteers/staff to share their experiences at recruitment events.
- Where: Community and college job/volunteer fairs, field-specific websites (Indeed, Volunteer Match, NASW, etc.), fundraising events, community events (music/food festivals, neighborhood gatherings, etc.), community education events (lectures, training at other agencies, etc.).
- Interns/practicum students (undergraduate and graduate): Some graduate students are required to have face to face contact hours, but not all, so check with each program in your area. If possible, coordinate with another department at your agency to help your interns get face-to-face hours in addition to phone/chat experience.
- Offer referral bonuses to current staff once the new hire has remained employed for a minimum amount of time.
- Ask applicants how they learned about your center to assess effectiveness of recruitment strategies.

Selection process

- Choose candidates with applicable experience:
 - Previous volunteer experience, specifically with longevity
 - Work in high-stress environments
 - Customer service roles
 - Task management/multitasking
 - Crisis intervention
 - Lived experience with mental illness and/or suicide
- Have the applicant interview with multiple staff if possible, individually or as a group. Ensure all interviewers use the same evaluation criteria. Documentation is vital, especially when there are differences of opinion about a candidate.
- Consider your training (including shadowing) to be an extension of the interview process. If trainees are unable to meet certain milestones (with supervision), they may not be an appropriate fit.
- Check with your Human Resources department and/or state and federal laws regarding what you are not allowed to ask in interviews. This may differ for volunteers versus staff.

Interviewing for skills/qualities

- Behavioral Questions: Ask about specific examples from the applicant's past experience. (ex: "Tell me about a time you worked effectively under pressure?")
- Empathy: Read a caller quote and ask the applicant to identify how the caller may be feeling/what they're experiencing.
- Commitment: Explore applicant's motivation for pursuing crisis counseling.
 - "What would you gain by working/volunteering here long-term?"
 - Consider asking volunteers to sign a 6-month or 1-year commitment.
- Non Judgmentalness: Ask about scenarios/topics that may reveal personal values/biases. (Ex: "What are your thoughts on those who remain in abusive relationships?")
- Active Listening: "What does it mean to you to be an active-listener? Tell me about a time when active-listening was difficult."
- Collaborative Problem-Solving: "How can a crisis counselor help someone in crisis?"
- Open to Feedback/Teachable: Ex: "Tell me about a time you got tough feedback from a supervisor." or "What do you think you'd need to learn in order to become an effective crisis counselor?" Be cautious if applicants believe they are 100% ready for calls/chats, as they may be resistant to training.
- Resilience: Ask about how they dealt with a challenging situation (coping skills used, what they learned, how they moved on afterwards).
- Self-awareness: "What do you think will be the easiest/most difficult thing about being a crisis counselor?" •Have resolved feelings from past traumas: If an applicant discloses that they have had a traumatic event in their life, assess for whether that would impact their ability to be an effective crisis counselor at this time. Additionally, assess for their thoughts on the use of self-disclosure in crisis counseling.

Using role plays in interviews

- Use standardized rating scales to evaluate (to include desired qualities).
- Set a time limit and stick to it. This may help you assess how an applicant would handle not having a "complete" call/chat.
- Have the applicant document the interaction to assess writing skills.
- Use role plays during the interview process to assess for:
 - Empathy: Is the applicant's first instinct to connect with the caller?

- o Active listening skills: minimal encouragements, paraphrasing, emotion labeling, mirroring, open-ended questions.
 - o Non judgmental responses.
 - o Open-ended questions and collaborative language versus directive problem solving.
- Remember: you're not looking for mastery in the interview, but instead their natural inclinations in assisting callers.

Evaluation of process

Implement exit interviews/surveys.

- Track and review retention rates regularly.
- Satisfaction surveys of current staff/volunteers.
- Involve an independent evaluator, perhaps a student conducting research.

Useful articles

- ["Nonprofit Recruiting Tips and Best Practices for Hiring Nonprofit Staff"](#)
- ["Best Interview Questions To Ask \(And How To Evaluate Answers\)"](#)
- ["Want to Really Get to Know Your Candidates? Interview for Emotional Intelligence"](#)