



Essential Services at Risk:

How Can the Corvallis Crisis Line Survive?

Corvallis Crisis Line (A): The Impact of Transitional Leadership

“We strive to empower our community, especially those facing crisis, through telephone intervention, support, information and referral. We hope to strengthen the community by training and educating people in crisis intervention skills so we can all help each other.”

~Crisis Line Mission Statement

The Corvallis Crisis Line (CCL) operates out of a nondescript pale yellow two-story house at a confidential location in Corvallis, OR. With a quiet porch, private drive, and seven-foot fence around the parking lot, it looks like the home of a recluse. Inside the old building the phone rings hourly with calls from people in crisis. Whether the caller is experiencing suicidal ideation, suffering from feelings of depression, or simply lonely, volunteers staffing the phone room listen and utilize techniques and tools learned through the extensive 40-hour training required for the position. Phone line volunteers do not attempt to solve problems, give advice, or force callers to make decisions; they simply act as an anonymous and warm human presence providing solace amidst a person’s experience of crisis.

Charles Bowden has been involved with the Crisis Line for 23 years in various capacities and remains steadfast in his belief the organization is an essential service for the community. In nearly two decades engaged with CCL, Bowden has volunteered on the phone line, served on the Board of Directors, donated financially, and he is currently acting Board President. As a long-time supporter and volunteer, Bowden has seen the Crisis Line go through a series of leadership changes and, in the past three years, he has witnessed challenges maintaining consistent organizational culture due to turnover in leadership.

In 2013 the Clinic had two full-time staff positions: Stephanie Dia was the Program Manager in charge of training cycles, volunteer support, and supervision of the AmeriCorps volunteer and college interns, and Pamela LaGrange was the CCL Manager overseeing the budget, building facilities, and assisting with volunteer support. Neither position supervised the other, and the two worked collaboratively to manage CCL. They had a productive working relationship and trusted each other to competently meet the expectations of their individual roles. Dia described their relationship,

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“Pamela and I were a formidable team. We had a clear understanding of our roles and our strengths. We called on each other to be a support as needed and we both had a lot of faith in our AmeriCorps Members. We prioritized the health and well being of our volunteers and felt it was our responsibility to ensure they felt cared for, seen, heard, listened to, respected, and we both spent a lot of time in the phone room. I say we a lot because we really were on the same page.”

While Dia and LaGrange ran CCL together, there was a robust roster of volunteers and typically 20-25 people attended each quarterly training cycle. Throughout Dia’s tenure as the point person for volunteers, the Clinic successfully maintained between 70-80 regular volunteers at any given time, and there was a strong support base in place. Dia also led community trainings for other local agencies and maintained relationships with Oregon State University and Lane Community College, where CCL drew interns from students studying psychology and social work. Jaqueline Pearson became involved as a phone line volunteer during this time. In 2014 Pearson would become the AmeriCorps member serving there. Reflecting on the beginning of her relationship with CCL, Pearson shared,

“When I was a volunteer, I had a really magical experience and really enjoyed the training. The training was well put together and I had a very positive experience. It was a very supportive environment. This was when Stephanie {Dia} was the Program Manager and people really liked her, she was supportive of volunteers and would come visit us on shift.”

This successful period lasted a little over a year before Dia chose to move on from CCL to pursue a new career path. While it was challenging to leave an organization she believed in, Dia was a single mother and sought work with an agency that could provide her a more competitive salary.

The First Transition

When Dia left to take a higher paying position with another local non-profit, CCL hired Ned Seaton to fill the leadership role. For a short time Seaton worked, as Dia had, as Program Manager but he felt the position should have more responsibility than the CCL Manager, and Seaton had the Board change the title to Program Director. At this time LaGrange’s title was changed to Operations Manager, and her role became relegated to focusing on building facilities and the budget with no formal interaction with volunteers. In this way Seaton became the primary manager of the Clinic, and LaGrange now reported to the Director as a supervisee instead of holding equal power. Describing the transition, LaGrange said,

“I thought Ned and I got along well when we were co-leaders, but when he became my boss a switch flipped and he no longer liked me anymore. There was a lot of micromanaging, and I started applying for other jobs.”

Others involved with CCL at this time, like AmeriCorps member Jaqueline Pearson, recalled the imbalance of power once the titles were changed. Seaton directly supervised Pearson, but LaGrange was more accessible for volunteers even though it was no longer her responsibility to provide support. This transition in power dynamics began the decline in support for volunteers

and interns the Crisis Line depended upon to operate. Pearson recalls the challenging position she was in – as the AmeriCorps member,

“There was a lot of tension between Pamela and Ned during my time as the AmeriCorps member. It was a difficult situation and it felt like Pamela hoped to solicit my allegiance in certain issues, and Ned assumed my allegiance to Pamela. When we had staff meetings, it was only the three of us and it was very uncomfortable.”

In the months following the change of roles, as Seaton began to take on more responsibility for CCL’s daily functions, there was an exodus of volunteers and interns. LaGrange described the challenges,

“Many volunteers left when Ned was the Director... I spent a bunch of my staff time taking phone shifts and overnights because we didn’t have enough volunteers. I covered more shifts in my last year than I had in my first 4 years. Ned damaged relationships with schools by leaving interns without any support or leadership. We were losing interns and volunteers. Losing interns was big because they would cover our overnight shifts.”

During this time, Bowman was primarily involved with CCL as a phone line volunteer. He stayed out of the politics and focused on his role as a support for community members in crisis. However, there was no way to ignore the damaging impact Seaton had on the organizational culture of CCL; Bowman noticed issues with the leadership as volunteers began leaving CCL. In spring of 2015, Seaton went on medical leave for two months and never returned.

Transitioning Again

Once Seaton was gone, it took the Board three months to refill the position. This time they hired someone new to the area, Rachel Olson from Colorado. Some Board members were resistant to hiring Olson due to her lack of connection in the area and a large number of grammatical errors in her application, but she was hired because there were few applicants and CCL had been without leadership for three months. Although Olson was relocating to Corvallis and did not have community connections, the Board was hopeful she would be able to assimilate. In September of 2015, Olson sent an introduction letter to mental health professionals in Corvallis and “*{her letter} was not well received and took us out of favor with that community*” (Board Minutes). This marked the beginning of Olson’s alienation of the local mental health community as she drove a wedge between CCL and its former supporters. Shortly after her hire, Olson attended a Board meeting and demanded to change her position title from Program Director to Executive Director. The Board acquiesced, and Olson’s first action under the new title was to raise her own salary.

In addition to alienating the local mental health community, Olson quickly began to affect volunteers through her lack of involvement and abusive behavior. She spent workdays sequestered in her upstairs office and had minimal interaction with volunteers and interns. Instead she relied upon the current AmeriCorps member, Dustin Edge, and the new Volunteer Coordinator to interface with volunteers. Pamela LaGrange was still on staff as the Operations Manager, but she

left a few months after Olson was hired. Reflecting upon the impact of Rachel's attitude towards volunteers, LaGrange said,

"There was already a depleted volunteer group after Ned left, but it got even worse under Rachel because she would not get to know the volunteers or ever talk to them or give them appreciation. People were not supported in their roles as volunteers... once Rachel yelled at a volunteer and cussed them out for asking her a question during a break in training. This made the person leave immediately and never return to volunteer."

Olson changed the volunteer training and reduced leadership involvement in the cycle. In previous years, a team of mental health professionals and experienced volunteers co-led the 40-hour volunteer training, but Olson changed the format and decreased the level of expertise. When CCL was functioning with Stephanie Dia as Program Manager, Dia herself led trainings backed by practiced volunteers and other professionals. As a former youth volunteer and new AmeriCorps member serving under Olson, Edge reflected on the changed training,

"CCL was not retaining volunteers because the training had gotten a lot worse. I remember it being a truly enlightening experience and it just wasn't very strong anymore. Rachel was having people who had only been volunteering for three months become trainers. It used to be you had to volunteer for a year and shadow a training cycle before being able to take on the responsibility of training. There used to be mental health professionals hosting trainings alongside experienced volunteers. Rachel was having interns act as trainers. People were getting a worse training – frankly it was a very mediocre training."

In June of 2016, while Olson was on medical leave, members (volunteers, donors, and former Board Members) concerned about the CCL's direction organized to seize control and push out Olson. This action was led by Bowman, supported by LaGrange, and took place during the annual membership meeting in a public park on a sunny June day. The group behind the coup met prior to the membership meeting and planned their action carefully – they knew the CCL's Board had to be elected by the membership and built a group of former Board members and volunteers who would challenge the current Board in an election to be held that day. Bowman describes the motivation for the extreme action,

"There was a coup. What happened is that folks with personal investments in CCL realized it was going downhill in the sense that people in the community had a bad taste in their mouths because of Rachel. I would hear from interns stories about horrible things she would do like calling people a fucking idiot. There were issues when she was displeased with people. There was a strong sense the organization was going south."

After the coup, the newly elected Board of Directors faced supporting the Corvallis Crisis Line without an Executive Director. As well, the one remaining staff person, a Volunteer Coordinator, left her position in August of 2016. Consequently, the only full-time presence at CCL would be the new AmeriCorps member, Diana Skral, who had been selected prior to Rachel's firing, and who would begin her service term on August 16, 2016. The Board had to determine a staff

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structure to support this AmeriCorps member, manage the upcoming volunteer training, and oversee daily needs of the clinic. Should they immediately begin the hiring process and refill the position quickly or focus on rebuilding the organizational culture of CCL and creating a clear vision for future leadership before hiring?