



Peer Partner Handbook

WELCOME

Peer partners play a tremendous role in our Ready For Life (RFL) Academy program. You are the backbone of the program and spend enormous amounts of time with our students, boosting their self-esteem and preparing them for future challenges. Our goal is that peer partners be proud to be involved in such a worthwhile endeavor. This is what dreams are made of and where miracles happen.

It is important that each peer partner realizes the responsibilities, as well as the rewards, involved in interacting with individuals with disabilities. Some days may be a great deal of work, while others may be easy. It is the hope of the RFL Board of Directors that each peer partner leaves the program a better individual because of the contribution he/she has made in changing the lives of our students.

This manual will provide information to help you get started as a peer partner for Ready for Life.

ABOUT READY FOR LIFE ACADEMY

Mission: To provide young adults experiencing cognitive, learning, and social disabilities opportunities to be challenged academically, build relationships, and prepare for their transition into life.

What We Do: RFL is a non-profit organization dedicated to providing inclusive learning opportunities to individuals with intellectual disabilities. We offer post-secondary education transition services on college campuses to those who would not normally be accepted to a two or four-year college so they can work on their life goals of independent living and paid employment alongside their non-disabled peers.



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GENERAL INFORMATION

Principles of Peer Partnering

1. Peer partnering involves people undertaking defined activities:
 - of their own free will
 - without payment (other than out of pocket expenses) and
 - which will be of benefit to the community and the organization concerned
2. RFL acknowledges the contribution that peer partners make to enhance the lives of people with Intellectual disabilities. Many of the services we provide could not operate as effectively or as extensively without the support and input of peer partners.
3. RFL seeks to effectively train and support peer partners. Peer partners will be provided with adequate instruction and training so that they are aware of their specific role within RFL and have the skills and understanding necessary to undertaking their role.
4. The involvement of peer partners will not displace paid staff.

Responsibilities of RFL

1. While the attention of RFL will naturally focus primarily on the tasks to be performed and on ensuring a sustained quality of service, the interests of both paid staff and peer partners will be considered.
2. The different roles, rights and responsibilities of peer partners and paid staff need to be clearly defined and understood by all parties, and a climate of mutual respect and confidence engendered.
3. RFL must ensure that peer partners tasks:
 - are clearly defined and consistent with Ready For Life's role and function in the same way they are for paid staff.
 - are useful, meaningful and do not exploit peer partners.
4. RFL must ensure that peer partners have a clear understanding of the objectives, role, and function of the organization.
5. To ensure that an effective working relationship is established, peer partners must be given:
 - a clear description of the tasks to be performed
 - orientation and appropriate training
 - appropriate supervision
6. Responsibility for peer partner programs must be vested with a member of the paid staff who possesses the appropriate skills in collaborating with peer partners.
7. RFL should ensure that a peer partner's expectations, interests, time commitment and skills match the task to be performed. This involves a clear description of the task, interview, and match of the peer partner.
8. Communication channels should be clear to all concerned and peer partner staff should be consulted on decisions which affect them. Consultation is especially necessary during times of change.
9. Peer partner activities should be assessed regularly. In addition, and where appropriate, individual peer partners should be given the opportunity for a formal appraisal of their contribution to RFL.

10. Peer partners, as is the case for RFL employees, will be covered by Equal Employment Opportunity policy and legislation, The Whistleblowers Protection Act, 1993, and the Occupational Health, Safety and Welfare Act.
11. Peer partners must be protected from unsafe situations in accordance with the principles and practices as set out in the Occupational Health, Safety and Welfare Act.
12. RFL must ensure that the budgetary and general resource costs of peer partners programs can be met. These costs include out-of-pocket expenses, as well as the time of paid staff for recruitment, orientation, support, supervision, and training.
13. There should be clear Organization guidelines concerning the payment of out-of-pocket expenses, assessed to be fair and reasonable, to cover matters such as mileage, fares and other costs associated with the job.
14. Disciplinary and grievance procedures applying to peer partners should be based in principles consistent with those for paid staff.

Responsibilities of the Peer Partner

1. The objectives, role, and function of RFL should be clearly understood by peer partners.
2. Peer partners have the same obligation as paid staff for working within RFL guidelines.
3. Peer partners should make realistic commitments in terms of both time and area of involvement and acknowledge the right of RFL to expect these commitments to be fulfilled.
4. As with paid staff, peer partners need to be aware of their responsibility to act according to instructions from appropriate individuals, and to adhere to the normal reporting mechanisms as practiced by RFL or as specifically established by their supervisor.
5. RFL deals with material of a confidential nature. RFL must ensure that peer partners who may have access to such information are aware of the importance of preserving confidentiality, and that failure to do so may result in the peer partners not participating in the Organization's activities in the future.
6. Peer partners bring energy, skills, and attributes to RFL. Nevertheless, many activities will require that they participate in training to enable them to perform tasks and to familiarize themselves with RFL. Peer partners should be willing to attend training and orientation sessions when offered.
7. After being made aware of the principles, practices and regulations set out or in organization with the Occupational Health, Safety and Welfare Act, peer partners will be required to observe these provisions.
8. You have a responsibility to respect the members, staff, fellow peer partners and the philosophy and policies of the RFL.
9. Infections spread readily. If you are sick, consider other staff, peer partners and RFL Students as well as yourself.
10. You have the responsibility to ask questions about things you do not understand. Discuss concerns rather than keeping them to yourself. Relevant information should be passed onto the coordinator.
11. When working with others, you have a responsibility to accept direction and supervision from paid staff and to maintain a good working relationship with your colleagues.
12. Accept other people's opinions even if you do not agree with them. Do not force others to agree with your opinions.

Peer Partner Rights

Orientation and Training

- You have the right to know as much about the Ready For Life as appropriate, including policy and programming.
- You have the right to initial training and continuing education.

Support and Respect

- You have the right to be treated as a co-worker by the people with whom you work.

Explanation

- You have the right to know if you are unsuitable for a task or your performance is unsatisfactory.

Peer Partner Satisfaction

- You have the right to be given suitable tasks with consideration for preference, temperament, life experiences, education, and employment background.
- You have the right to have a task that is challenging, worthwhile and enjoyable.

Say 'No'

- You have the right to say "No," to tasks outside your abilities.

Interacting with Individuals with Intellectual disabilities

When interacting with people who have intellectual disabilities, there are things to keep in mind to make you and the other individual as comfortable as possible.

- ✓ Treat those with intellectual disabilities as you would like to be treated.
- ✓ Think before you speak and avoid using labels, as they are offensive to everybody.
- ✓ Try to avoid showing or conveying pity. Do not be patronizing. Do not talk down to them or treat the adults as children.
- ✓ Talk directly to them (not to their parents or caregivers). Make eye contact and smile. Speak in clear, simple sentences and give them time to respond.

Always try to remember that individuals with intellectual disabilities are people like you and me. Just like you, they want to be treated with dignity and respect. Their disability is one of their characteristics.

PEER PARTNER POLICIES

It is the policy of Ready For Life to encourage peer partners to work with our students and staff. Each peer partner working must be free from communicable disease and the peer partners' physical and mental health will not negatively affect either the health of the client/student or the quality of the client/student's education. We will require criminal history and other pertinent background checks.

A peer partner, under the direction of Ready For Life, will be required to review and familiarize him/herself with the policies and procedures of Ready For Life.



PERSONNEL POLICIES

Personal Conduct

Each peer partner of RFL is expected to conduct himself/herself in a manner that will reflect favorably on the image of RFL and the character and/or competence of the peer partner. Any peer partner who behaves unprofessionally, or who brings discredit in any way upon himself or herself, other peer partners or employees of RFL or RFL itself will be terminated from the program.

Record Management

The classroom lead instructor maintains records on each peer partner at Ready For Life (RFL) Academy. Records include application, background check inquiries and dates of peer partner service. Peer partner records are confidential. Peer partners are responsible for submitting and updating information contained in their files to the lead classroom instructor.

Dress Code

Peer partners are representative of RFL and are responsible for presenting a positive image to constituents and the community. Peer partners will dress appropriately for the conditions and performance of their duties. Peer partners who work as support in an office or classroom situation will dress according to the code of the office or classroom. Individual peer partners will be informed of the dress standard for their duties at the time of assignment.

Attendance and time

Peer partner attendance is important to the operation of each program. Peer partners should notify their supervisor in advance if they are unable to be present on their scheduled day or presentation. Peer partners are responsible for completing and submitting their peer partner time on the applicable logs.

Service Requirement

Peer partners agree to commit to a minimum number of hours of service for the semester. At the end of a semester, peer partners may elect to renew their peer partner service agreement with RFL. The number of service hours requested is approximately 15 hrs. each semester. However, this service requirement varies by opportunity.

COMPANY POLICIES

Abuse Prevention

To provide a safe and healthy environment for both mind and body, the following guidelines are meant to guide Ready For Life employees/volunteers during their interactions with clients/students. These guidelines do not and cannot outline every situation that may be encountered while on the job, requiring employees to act with a certain degree of personal discretion. Because a certain action is not prohibited in this section does not mean it is acceptable behavior. Ready For Life reserve the right to take disciplinary action against employees/volunteers whose actions are found to be inappropriate regardless of whether they appear in this section.

- Employees/volunteers will treat all clients/students with respect and consideration. Treatment must be fair and equal, and must not be based on sex, race, religion, sexual orientation or economic or social status. All effort must be made to avoid favoritism or the appearance of favoritism.
- Employees/volunteers must not use harsh or inappropriate language, degrading punishment or any type of restraining device in the name of behavior management.
- Employees/volunteers must not participate in or allow others to engage in any form of hazing.
- Employees/volunteers must not have sexual contact with clients/students.
- Employees/volunteers must not dress, undress, shower, or bathe with or in the presence of student.
- Employees/volunteers must not use physical punishment in any form. The only time physical force can be used against client/student is when their actions are placing others at an immediate risk for serious harm.
- Employees/volunteers must not discuss their own sexual history, preferences, or fantasies nor their use of illicit or pornographic materials while in the company of clients/students.
- Employees/volunteers are not allowed to possess any sexually oriented materials (Books, magazine, videos, clothing) when conducting business in the name of Ready For Life.
- When one-on-one discussion or counseling is warranted, employee/volunteer interaction with a client/student will take place in an area that allows for private conversation while remaining in the view of others.

Alcohol and Drugs/Smoking

We are a Drug and Alcohol Free and Zero Tolerance Workplace. One of RFL's highest priorities is providing a safe environment for participants, peer partners and employees. The RFL policy on this matter is: **RFL prohibits the use, sale, transfer, or possession of drugs and/or alcoholic beverages, by its peer partners, on the RFL premises while in the service of RFL, including your lunch break. RFL prohibits peer partners from working in an impaired state.** Failure to comply with this policy will result in immediate termination from the program.

Ready For Life supports a tobacco/drug/alcohol-free lifestyle and workplace. **Smoking is prohibited at all events.**

Anti-Harassment

It is the intent of RFL to provide our peer partners with the best possible working environment. It is the policy of RFL that there is no harassment of our staff or peer partners by co-workers, supervisors, or non-employees with whom we come in contact during our working activities. Harassment serves no legitimate business purpose. RFL will not tolerate any harassment, including, but not limited to, harassment or discrimination based upon race, national origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation, pregnancy, age, marital status, physical or mental disability, mental condition, or veteran status.

Examples of activities NOT constituting harassment include constructive suggestions, comments or interventions, and actions to terminate participation of peer partners in the RFL program. RFL takes issues of harassment seriously and will take immediate and appropriate steps to investigate and correct



violations of our policy. RFL peer partners should report any instances of alleged harassment to the Executive Director. It is the policy of RFL to resolve issues of harassment in a prompt and consistent fashion, and to maintain the highest levels of confidentiality in all aspects of such matters.

Confidential Records

All records and files of RFL are the property of RFL and considered confidential. No peer partner is authorized to copy or disclose any file or record.

Confidential Information and Nondisclosure

Each RFL student has a right to confidentiality. By partnering with students at this organization, you are placed in a position of trust about information regarding students. Peer partners must constantly be aware of the confidential nature of all information regarding the students.

We are required by law to keep protected health information confidential and to provide a privacy notice of our legal duties and privacy practices with respect to all protected health information. Ready For Life will abide by the terms of this Notice as it is currently in effect. We reserve the right to change the practices described in this Notice and to apply the new provisions to all the health information we maintain, regardless of when it was created or received. If a peer partner is contacted about the protected health information of a consumer or employee, direct the person to the Executive Director and immediately notify the Executive Director of this contact.

Emergency Response

The goals of this plan are, in order of priority, to protect the lives and health of Ready for Life students and peer partners.

Priorities are:

- Evacuate and account for all RFL clients and students
- Contact local emergency service organizations
- Contact supports coordinators and house staff who in turn will contact parents/guardians.
- Conduct search-and-rescue operations, turnoff utilities, control any hazardous chemical spills
- Prevent further property damage through protective measures or by removing property
- Perform clean-up or salvage as needed
- File incident report if needed

Response Procedures

Fire: Peer partner and clients will follow the fire evacuation route designated by the community location or the home where the client lives. Once at a safe meeting place, the peer partner will make sure the client is accounted for and then call 911.

Tornado: Peer partner and clients will follow tornado emergency plan designated by the community location or the home where the client lives. Once at a safe meeting place, peer partner will make sure the client is accounted for. Client and peer partner will remain in the safe location until the warning has ceased.

Lockdown: Peer partner and client will follow the lockdown emergency plan designated by the community location or the home where the client lives. Once at a safe meeting

place, peer partner will make sure the client is accounted for. Client and peer partner will remain in the safe location until the threat has ceased.

Rules of Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures

Peer partners are expected to follow rules of conduct that will protect the interest and safety of all peer partners, staff, and students. The following are examples of inappropriate conduct which could lead to dismissal:

- Theft or inappropriate removal or possession of RFL's property or that of any RFL peer partner, staff, student, agent, or visitor, including failing to cooperate fully in any RFL investigation.
- Altering RFL reports or records.
- Volunteering under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs and/or illegal or unauthorized possession, distribution, sale, transfer, or use of alcohol or illegal drugs in the RFL environment.
- Creating a disturbance on RFL premises, at sponsored activities or in areas which could jeopardize the safety of others.
- Improper use of RFL's property or property owned by any other individual or organization.
- Lack of cooperation, or other disrespectful conduct.
- Violation of RFL, federal, state, or local safety and health rules.
- Inappropriate use of telephones, computer equipment or systems, e-mail system, facsimile machine, or other RFL-owned equipment.
- Unsatisfactory performance or conduct.

Whenever a peer partner's behavior warrants disciplinary action, RFL staff will determine the appropriate action. Types of discipline may include verbal warning, written warning, or termination from the program. The disciplinary action taken will depend upon the seriousness of the offense.

Safety and Liability

RFL aims to provide a safe and healthy environment for all peer partners. If a peer partner is injured during the peer partners' service, it is important that the peer partner notify his or her supervisor immediately. Peer partners should also complete an incident report and submit the report to the peer partners' supervisor.

RFL's general liability coverage, with some limitations and exclusions, protects peer partners for covered injury or damage that results from activities or service that peer partners conduct or perform at RFL's direction and within the scope of their duties for RFL. RFL's general liability coverage does not provide coverage to peer partners themselves for liabilities they may have incurred for their actions. RFL's peer partners accident insurance coverage covers some injuries to peer partners while peer partners are performing peer partner service on behalf of RFL.

In some instances, peer partners must sign a release absolving RFL of liability when RFL peer partners voluntarily and knowingly subject themselves to certain risks while performing peer partner services on behalf of RFL. Contact the lead instructor with questions or for more information about insurance and liability.

Social Media

We have created these social networking/media guidelines for you to follow when representing Ready For Life in the virtual world.

Please do the following:

- **Use good judgment** - We expect you to use good judgment in all situations; You must know and follow Ready for Life's Code of Conduct and Privacy Policy; Regardless of your privacy settings, assume that all the information you have shared on your social network is public information.
- **Be respectful** - Always treat others in a respectful, positive, and considerate manner.
- **Be responsible and ethical** - If you are approved to represent Ready for Life, unless you are specifically authorized to speak on behalf of Ready for Life as a spokesperson, you should state that the views expressed in your postings, etc. are your own. Stick with discussing organization-related matters that are within your area of responsibility; Be open about your affiliation with Ready For Life and the role/position you hold.
- **Be a good listener** - Keep in mind that one of the biggest benefits of social media is that it gives others another way to talk to you, ask questions directly and to share feedback; Be responsive others when conversing online. Provide answers, thank people for their comments, and ask for further feedback, etc.; Always be doing at least as much listening and responding as you do "talking."

Do not share the following:

- **Confidential information** - Do not publish, post, or release information that is considered confidential or not public. If it seems confidential, it is. Online "conversations" are never private. Do not use your birth date, address, and cell phone number on any public website.
- **Private and personal information** - To ensure your safety, be careful about the type and amount of personal information you provide. Avoid talking about personal schedules or situations; NEVER give out or transmit personal information of students, parents, or co-workers; Do not take information you may receive through social networking (such as e-mail addresses, customer names or telephone numbers) and assume it is the most up-to-date or correct; Always respect the privacy of Ready For Life community members.

PEER PARTNER DESCRIPTIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

There are several ways you can peer partner with RFL:

- **Social Peer partner:** Attend on and off campus events with an RFL student or group of students. Attend lunch or chapel with an RFL student(s).
- **In-Class Peer partner:** Assist an RFL student in a college class that you are already taking. Sit by the RFL students, assist with notetaking, group work, and/or group discussions.
- **RFL Classroom Peer partner:** Join the RFL students in the RFL classroom for their life skills classes. Participate in course instruction or assist with notetaking, group work, or class discussions. Work one-on-one with an RFL student on course work for their college classes, modify the course work to meet their needs based on instructor approval.



SUPPORT AND RECOGNITION FOR PEER PARTNERS

Ready For Life sponsors recognition events for peer partners to highlight the contributions of peer partners to the organization. Continuing recognition of peer partners is vital and will occur throughout the year.

IN CONCLUSION

Thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to peer partner for Ready For Life Academy. Without caring people like you, willing to give of your precious time the Academy would not be the success that it is.

People just like you are willing to donate time for a variety of reasons. Some peer partners choose to help others less fortunate than themselves; some do it to give themselves something to do and others peer partner for the friendship and companionship of others. Whatever your reason may be, Ready For Life wants to thank you for your dedication and hard work. We hope that this experience has been an enjoyable one for you, and we hope to have you as a peer partner at future events.

THANK YOU!

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