

PEOPLE FIRST

CHAPTER HANDBOOK



SECTION ii

PEOPLE FIRST CHAPTERS

“People First chapters belong to the members”

Starting A Chapter

Keeping A Chapter Strong

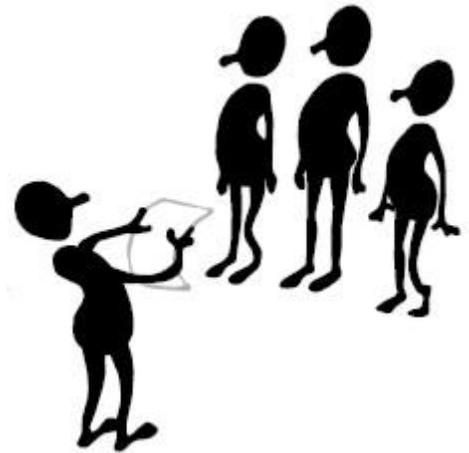
A People First chapter begins when a group of people with developmental disabilities decide to get together to learn to speak for themselves and share ideas, friendship and information. Starting a chapter helps members learn and use a process for working together and getting things done.

PRINCIPLES TO REMEMBER

There are two important principles to remember when starting a People First chapter.

❶ The chapter belongs to the members

The most important thing to remember when starting a People First chapter is to be sure that the members have control and power right from the beginning so that the chapter belongs to the members.



This means that members must be able to decide and determine when and where the group meets, who the advisor is, and what goes on in the meetings.

❷ Starting a chapter takes time

Starting a People First chapter takes time. It takes careful planning and thinking and a lot of discussion. It is important that everyone understands what People First and self advocacy are and why they want to form a chapter.



It is important to take enough time so that everyone understands what is going on and is able to participate in getting the chapter started. Start small and set realistic goals

It is important to have success right at the very beginning so everyone will feel good about the group and themselves.

START-UP STEPS TO TAKE

Here are some of the steps to take when starting a People First chapter.

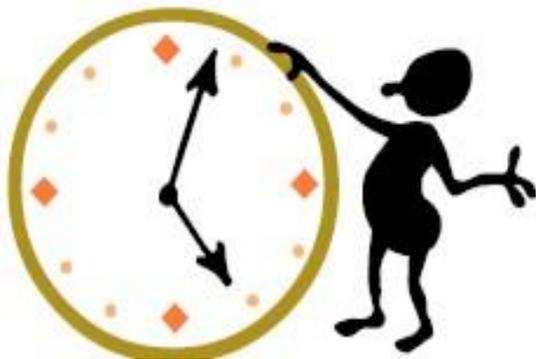
❶ Find out how other People First chapters work and learn from them

Contact a People First chapter or other self-advocacy group who can help you get started. If you have a chapter nearby invite them to visit and talk to you about starting your own chapter. The People First of West Virginia organization can help you get started. You can also find the names of many People First chapters and self-advocacy groups on the People First website at www.peoplefirstwv.org. You can contact these groups by letter or e-mail and ask them about their chapters.

❷ Decide what each person will do to help get the chapter started

Make sure everyone understands what needs to be done to get the chapter started. Some things that need to be done include finding a place to meet, letting people know about the meeting and deciding what is going to be on the agenda for the meeting.

If you want, you can set up an “organizing committee” to get the chapter going. Just remember it is important that everyone be able to participate and be a valued chapter member. Successful People First chapters find ways to get every member involved in the group.



❸ Set up a time and place for a meeting

A time and place needs to be set up for the first meeting. Find an accessible place to meet that is close to the bus lines. Try and find a place to meet that is not where the members live or work. Some ideas for places to meet could be a church, a school or a local government office, or restaurant conference rooms.

Make sure the day and time you meet is good for everyone. Make sure the day and time you meet is not the same day and time when people are already involved in other things.

④ Let people know about the meeting

Let as many people as you can know about your meeting and that you are starting a People First chapter. The more members you have in your chapter, the stronger your self advocacy voice will be for yourselves and the community.

Talk with your friends about what you are doing and encourage them to come to your meeting.



⑤ Decide on an agenda for the meeting

An agenda is a list of what will be discussed in a meeting. It is important to have an agenda so that everyone knows what needs to be discussed and the meeting does not get sidetracked. For more information on agendas see the handbook section on meetings.



In deciding an agenda make sure that everyone gets a chance to speak and participate during the meeting. It is important to share power so that everyone feels like an important and equal member. Get everyone involved in the group. Use easy to understand words and pictures during the meetings to make sure everyone understands what is going on.

In the first meeting focus on making sure everyone understands what People First and self-advocacy are and why you want to meet as a group. Use can use a video as a way of introducing self-advocacy to new members or have people from other self advocacy groups talk about what self-advocacy means to them.

Don't elect officers at the first meeting. Wait for two or three meetings. This gives everyone a chance to speak and get to know the other members before you vote.

Plan to do some fun things together as a group during the meeting. Make people feel good about being there. Have refreshments and a "social time" at the end of the meeting.

Thank everyone for coming to the meeting and make sure they know when the next meeting is before you adjourn. Hand out calendars so everyone will know when the next meeting is.

START-UP DECISIONS TO BE MADE



The key to success is to make the correct decisions when starting a People First chapter.

❶ Decide on the purpose for your chapter

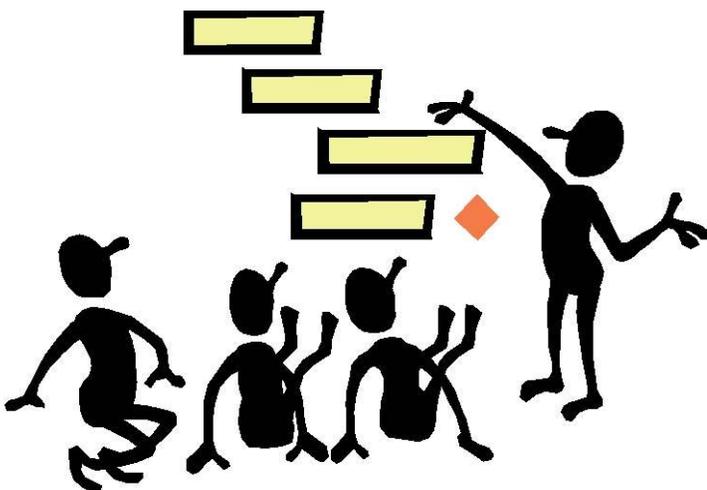
When everyone has to decide the purpose of the group it gives members lots of ideas about what kind of activities the group can do and how to organize these activities. It gets members involved.

When you have decided on the purpose of your group, write it down. This is your mission statement.

The mission statement of People First of West Virginia is:

“People First recognizes that persons with developmental disabilities are people first. Our purpose is to promote self-advocacy by speaking and acting on behalf of the rights and responsibilities of all people with developmental disabilities.”

❷ Decide on the rules for how chapter members will work together



As a group, make rules for how the group will work. Examples of rules include: who can be a member, how meetings are to be held, whether or not you will have dues and how they will be collected, how you will vote to decide on things, how officers are chosen, etc. Make sure everyone understands what the rules are before you vote on them.

Write down the rules you decide on. These are your **bylaws**.

See Appendix A for the by-laws of People First of West Virginia.

③ Decide on the goals for your chapter

Decide on the goals for your People First chapter. Set realistic goals and keep them simple. Being able to successfully meet some of your goals right at the very beginning will make everyone will feel good about the group and themselves.

Goals will be different for different chapters. People First chapters are run by the members and the goals they set will reflect the needs of the members. Some chapters are more social and recreation oriented with their primary goal providing peer support and group activities. Others are more political with members speaking out against budget cuts and talking with legislators. Many chapters are a combination of both.

Chapter goals will also change over time. Some goals will be met. Others will change as the needs of members or the services in the community change. It is important to have the members discuss the chapter goals once or twice a year to see what progress is being made and if the goals are still realistic.

When you have set the goals for your chapter, discuss what you will do to reach your goals. Write down what you decide. This is your plan of action.

④ Decide on how to develop team spirit

It is important that People First chapters help members develop a working friendship and team spirit.

Members need to learn and practice working together and getting things done. The process needs to include all the members so everyone gets a chance to share ideas and to feel good about who they are. It is important that every member feel a part of what is happening so no one feels left out or alone.



When people get together to discuss and work on issues that are important to them there are going to be disagreements. Members need to learn how to debate both sides of an issue and come up with a group consensus without getting hurt feelings. Members need to decide how to help people get over their hurt feelings when there are disagreements in the group.

A good way to develop team spirit is to make meetings and events fun as well as work. Learning and practicing good humor will help members work better together in the chapter and community as well as in their personal lives

5 Decide on how to develop connections with the local community

People with developmental disabilities are an important part of their community. They live in the community. They go to school and work in the community. They shop and participate in recreational activities in the community. People First members can help teach the community that people with developmental disabilities are people with the same interests as everyone else.

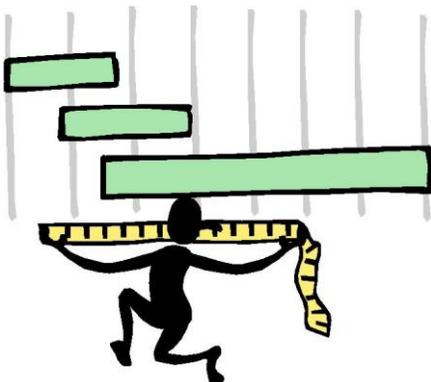


To do that it is important for members to be active and interact with other individuals and groups in their community. Members can participate on Councils, Boards, and Committees. They can develop service projects for the communities in which they live.

It is also important the people with developmental disabilities learn about the community where they live and how it works. People First can help members learn by holding workshops and inviting guest speakers such as public health nurses, policemen and local government officials.

By being active participants People First members can teach the community about them and teach themselves about the community.

6 Decide on how to evaluate how well the chapter is doing



It is important to periodically evaluate how the chapter is doing. Have members discuss how they think things are going. Discuss if the goals for the chapter are still the same or if they need to change. Make changes when most of the members agree that something needs to be changed..

Starting a People First chapter takes hard work and commitment from members and advisors but the results can be extremely rewarding.



After a People First chapter has been started, you need to think about how to keep the group going. All groups have “ups” and “downs.” All groups will have problems at times. One of the most important things to keep a group going over time is to face problems head on. Problems don't just go away on their own. You have to face them and try to work them out. When your group has problems, remember to give people a chance to grow and change.

Most people have never had the experience of being part of a self advocacy group like People First where they get to make the decisions and solve problems on their own. Sometimes, it is hard to be a self advocate, and people need time and understanding to work out problems and grow as a group.

STEPS TO TAKE A KEEP CHAPTER STRONG

- ① Make sure that everyone knows when and where the meetings are.

Call people to remind them about the meeting. Make up a meeting notice flyer and put these up. Put the location, directions on how to get to the meeting, and the phone number of who to call for more information on the flyer.

- ② Make sure the day and time you meet is good for everyone. Make sure the day and time you meet is not the same day and time when people are already involved in other things.

- ③ Make sure there is a place and something for everybody at the meeting.

It is important for everyone to have something to say at the meeting and a way to feel that they are an important part of the group. The best way to keep people involved with the group is to find a way for everyone to be involved. Committees are a good way to get everyone involved, plan things, and get things done. Committees give everyone a chance to have responsibilities and feel like an important part of the group.

④ Make sure the discussions in the meetings are real and important to the members.

Discussions in the meetings must be about things that are important to the members. Each group has to decide what is real and important to them. If you keep the discussions real, and on things that are important to the members' lives, then people will want to come to the meetings and take part.

⑤ Always have officer meetings

Officer meetings are a good time to learn about leadership, talk about and solve problems the group is having. The goal is for the officers to run the meeting on their own. An officer meeting should be about one week before membership meetings, to give people a chance to learn and practice their duties and to make sure everything is ready for the regular meeting.

⑥ Plan some fun things together

Don't make the meetings all "hard work." Go out and eat together , go on a camping trip together, do fun things together. Find things to do together that build "team spirit."

⑦ Don't let the meetings get boring.

