

# Waitlist Management Strategies for PEACE Programs: Enhancing Capacity to Deliver VIP

BC Society of Transition Houses (BCSTH) | August 2025

## Waitlist Research

For several years the BC Society of Transition Houses (BCSTH) has heard from PEACE Programs that lengthy waitlists are a barrier to delivering VIP. In 2024, with funding from BC's GBV Action Plan **Safe and Supported** BCSTH conducted research into waitlist management strategies, including consultations with PEACE Programs to learn about what strategies work well and how these practices may enhance capacity to deliver Violence is Preventable (VIP).

## What We Learned

We learned that PEACE Programs are highly skilled, resourceful and creative when it comes to waitlist management. They shared innovative and thoughtful approaches that aligned with best practices identified in the literature. This tip sheet highlights these practices and builds on the existing waitlist management guidance available in page 321 of the **PEACE Program Toolkit**, to assist PEACE Programs struggling to balance program waitlists and VIP delivery.

## Meeting Families as Soon as Possible

Prioritizing intake and meeting with families as soon as possible can help to increase engagement. This is an opportunity to share information about the program such as an orientation package and address any concerns the family may have. BCSTH developed a template Orientation Booklet for Parents and Caregivers in the PEACE Program that is available to download from the Supporting Mothers in the PEACE Program toolkit, [here](#).

## Clearly Communicating the Program Mandate

Clearly communicating the program mandate via program materials and brochures, networking and community events and information sessions can help to reduce inappropriate referrals. Programs may wish to review existing materials to ensure the mandate is clearly stated and that all resources are easy to read and understand with translation available.

## Screening

Implementing screening procedures as soon as possible can prevent participants who are not eligible for services from wasting time on the waitlist. Screening tools should be sufficient to enable program staff to make informed decisions regarding fit for services (Brown et al., 2002).

## Triaging

Urgency of need and length of time on the waitlist were the most common factors used by PEACE Programs to prioritize waitlisted participants for service. Programs may wish to consider the use of tools to avoid bias when triaging, and should bear in mind that new clients are not being compared with those who have been on the waitlist for some time unless regular check-ins and contact have been maintained to monitor the needs of waitlisted participants (Brown et al., 2002; The Conference Board of Canada, 2023). The **HEADS-ED** is one example of a simple screening tool used to identify mental health and addictions needs in children and youth and improve access to care by identifying the intensity and urgency of services required.

## Waitlist Management Systems

Programs may find it helpful to develop waitlist management systems if these are not already in place. For example, a system to assess and assign risk to new referrals or creating a risk assessment protocol for waitlisted participants could be considered. Some literature discussed segmenting waitlists into cohorts to help with waitlist management, i.e., new contacts, any safeguarding issues, other provisions or supports being received, date of last contact, and time overdue for services. One survey respondent described having set up a referral tracking system to manage their waitlists as follows:

**“One strategy I find works well to keep track of all referrals and both counsellors access it, is our spreadsheet of all referrals in order of referral date, each new referral is taken by one or the other counsellor. This ensures that no one is missed. Then we just go through the list, first come first served.”**

## Checking In

Regular check-ins with waitlisted families can allow programs to review and document risk and assess need for waitlisted participants. It can also help to manage participants' expectations regarding when services may start, increase engagement, and allow programs to ensure contact information is up to date. During check-ins, programs can remind families that they can contact the program any time during the wait-period if they need support, or offer referrals to another program if the family is moving away.

## Interim Supports & Services

There are many benefits to providing interim supports and services to waitlisted participants including:

- increased engagement;
- helping prepare families for services;
- reducing the need for services and support; and
- maintaining contact with families while they wait which can help to inform decisions regarding triaging and readiness/fit for group sessions if available.

Interim supports and services that PEACE Program counsellors reported offering ranged from sharing information and resources (i.e., referrals and information, books, websites, podcasts, handouts and activities); checking in with families online or by phone; offering group sessions or camps; inviting families to see the centre; or hosting family movie nights or games nights.

Interim supports for parents and caregivers were common in the literature, with peer support and resources that provide information about how agencies operate, increase parenting skills and support parents to overcome the challenges they are dealing with reported to be particularly beneficial (Cunningham et al., 2013). PEACE Program counsellors shared that groups for parents and caregivers were helpful when there are not enough children and youth of the same age on the waitlist to run groups for them.

## Group Sessions

PEACE Program counsellors we spoke to described running group sessions both as an interim support for participants on the waitlist, and as a waitlist reduction strategy that allowed them to see more children and youth already in the program. However, many programs faced barriers to implementing this due to not having a co-facilitator, not having time or capacity to plan and deliver groups, or not having enough children and youth of the same age-group to run groups, particularly in smaller communities.

## Spreading Out Sessions

Reducing session frequency was another strategy that enabled some PEACE Program counsellors to see more participants by creating space in the program. This may need to be decided on a case-by-case basis as it may not be suitable for all participants. For example, some PEACE Program counsellors described only doing this with participants who had been in the program for a while after they had completed a few sessions.

## Developing Clear Organizational Policies & Procedures

Having clear policies and procedures around waitlist management strategies was recommended in the literature. For example, a policy that outlines how many missed appointments or unsuccessful attempts to contact families should be made before putting them back on the waitlist or closing their file. The [PEACE Program Policy Template and Guide](#) shares template policies regarding eligibility, referrals, assessment, waitlist management and safety planning, which may be a helpful starting point for programs who want to develop policies.

Clearly communicating policies and the reasons they exist in a trauma and violence informed way and implementing them flexibly was emphasized by both PEACE Program counsellors and the literature. Specific considerations and extra supports may be required for some participants, e.g., youth, parents with barriers to accessing services, and parents with mental health difficulties.

## Managing No Shows

A range of techniques were described to support with managing no shows. These included:

- sending appointment reminders;
- offering regular appointment times;
- providing schedules in advance;
- trying to offer families their preferred appointment times;
- coordinating sessions with parent appointments if they are accessing other programs such as Stopping the Violence (STV) counselling;
- picking up/dropping off kids for appointments;
- inquiring about upcoming vacations;
- inquiring about extended family members who can help bring kids to appointments; and
- avoiding days and times when no shows seem to be more common.

As mentioned above, many programs described organizational policies around cancellations and no-shows.

## Making Referrals & Sharing Information About Other Programs & Services

Sharing information about, and making referrals to, other local services was described as an ethical responsibility in the literature (Brown et al., 2002). Many PEACE Programs reported referring out to other local agencies when at capacity, however many noted that these services are also often struggling with long waitlists and sometimes are looking to refer to the PEACE program.

Some PEACE Programs that are located nearby make referrals to each other and some pool their waitlists and work collaboratively to address the community need. For PEACE Programs in close enough proximity and interested in working collaboratively, BCSTH can provide support to facilitate this relationship through hosting regional or community meetings and assisting with drafting reciprocal MOUs.

## Partnerships Working

There may be scope in some places for working collaboratively with other local services. For programs who have good relationships with schools, this was described as highly beneficial for both delivering VIP and managing waitlists and was also recommended in the literature (Kourgiantakis et al., 2023; So, 2019; Representative for Children and Youth, 2013). However, developing these relationships takes time and resources and for programs serving large communities this may not benefit all children and youth in the area. Some PEACE Programs were also partnering with community hubs and community retreats or offering out of hours appointments.

## Remote Service Delivery

Less than one third of PEACE Programs (28.2 per cent) reported offering sessions by phone or online 'almost always' or 'often' as a waitlist reduction strategy. During the pandemic, programs pivoted to offering services remotely and challenges experienced included the digital divide, engaging younger children and youth, safety concerns, and lack of experience and confidence with delivering services virtually. However, some parents and caregivers found remote supports more convenient and this strategy may lend itself well to supporting some parents and caregivers or teens. Remote sessions may be effective as a supplement to in-person supports, or when they are the only option if PEACE Program counsellors feel comfortable providing services this way, it is deemed safe and suits program participants (Aboujaoude & Salame, 2016 as cited in Cox, 2017).

## References

Brown, S.A., Parker, J.D. & Godding, P.R. (2002) Administrative, clinical and ethical issues surrounding the use of waiting lists in the delivery of mental health services. The Journal of Behavioural Health Services & Research, 29:2.

Cox, J. (2017) Access to Child and Youth Mental Health Services in BC: Barriers, recommendations, and strategies for improvement.

Cunningham, C.E., Chen, Y., Deal, K., Rimas, H., McGrath, P., Reid, G., Lipman, E., & Corkum, P. (2013) The interim service preferences of parents waiting for children's mental health treatment: A discrete choice conjoint experiment. Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology 41:865-867.

Kourgiantakis, T., Markoulakis, R., Lee, E., Hussain, A., Lau, C., Ashcroft, R., Goldstein, A.L., Kodeeswaran, S., Williams, C.C., Levitt, A. (2023). Access to mental health and addiction services for youth and their families in Ontario: Perspectives of parents, youth and service providers. International Journal of Mental Health Systems, 17:4.

Representative for Children and Youth (2013) Still Waiting: First-Hand Experiences with Youth Mental Health Services in B.C.

So, M., McCord, R.F. & Kaminski, J.W. (2019) Policy levers to promote access to and utilization of children's mental health services: A systematic review. Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research, 46:334-351.

The Conference Board of Canada (2023) Nurturing Minds for Secure Futures: Timely Access to Mental Healthcare Services for Children and Youth in Canada.

---

© BC Society of Transition Houses, 2025.

This resources or any portion thereof may be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever as long as acknowledgement to the BC Society of Transition Houses is included in the reproduced work.