



# A Better End: Supporting Our Communities around Death & Dying



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**Community Access expands opportunities for people living with mental health concerns to recover from trauma and discrimination through affordable housing, training, advocacy and healing-focused services. We are built upon the simple truth that people are experts in their own lives.**



# Community Access, Inc.

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## **THEN:**

- Founded in 1974
- Friends, families, activists came together to rent, renovate and run housing on the Lower East Side in NYC

## **NOW:**

- Low-threshold, supportive housing throughout the Bronx, Manhattan & Brooklyn
- Howie the Harp Advocacy Center
- Peer-Operated Respite Center
- Mobile Teams
- Art Collective
- Self-Direction program
- Supported Education program & more



# Death & Dying at Our Community

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- Shortened life expectancy of participants
- Low-threshold housing serving as NORC's
- Current crises of death related to overdose and COVID

# Challenges & Barriers

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# Challenges & Barriers

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- Lack of knowledge of systems and how to navigate
- Lack of knowledge of advance planning rights
- Challenges in engaging participants in conversations about death & dying
- Lack of support/resources for staff and communities
- Workers with little to no experience around death, newly facing concerns around loss, mortality, etc.
- Workers with a great deal of experience with death, loss, experiencing re-traumatization and overload
- A health system not providing adequate supports for those with serious medical concerns and therefore supportive housing workers are left filling in some gaps



# Our Death & Dying Workgroup



- Incident Review Committee
- Gaps identified:
  - Advanced Planning - knowledge, skills, and support to complete
  - Memorial/Legacy Planning
  - Support for the community (participants and staff) around loss
  - Overall – Comfort/ability in the community to raise topic of death & dying



# Our D&D Workgroup Structure



- Project Manager(s) to oversee the committee
- Inclusion of those within the programs
- Zoom meetings/participation (even before COVID-19)
- Subgroups/Project Groups
- Each D&D meeting begins with an icebreaker



# Icebreaker Questions - Sample

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- Share a movie you like about death and dying
- Would you like to know when/how you would die? Why/Why not?
- What is the number one item on your bucket list?
- What would be the color of death for you? Why?
- What is one thing you would like to bury with & why?
- Talk about a celebrity or famous person's death that deeply affected you?
- What would you do if you found out you only had one month to live?
- What is one song you would want played or one food you would want served at your memorial/funeral service?
- What would be the ideal scenario for your death?

# Things we've done

- Discussion/viewing of [\*Being Mortal\*](#), with Atul Gawande
- Day of the Dead & other program events as conversation starters
- Memorial prep packages for Managers/programs
- Monthly Support Groups (Not a therapy group)

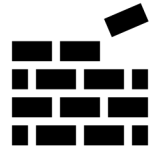


# Things we've done



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- Advance planning workshops through community organizations with expertise
  - Guidance document explaining various advance planning rights & tools
  - Developing & uploading training in LMS
  - Reviewing/updating policies in collaboration with Senior Administration

# Things in process



- “Learning on the Fly” events when it is safer again to gather
- *Re-imagine NYC*
- Drop-in Sessions for Advanced Directives
- Gatherings - D&D Poems, Writing for Grief, D&D Playlist
- D & D group as pollinators

# What if?

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D&D Committee is not an option....



What is possible?

# Things to Consider

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- Values and/or Personal Experiences
- Comfort Level
- Knowledge
- Meeting/Group Facilitation Skills
- Planning and Implementation within your Program/Organization

# Some examples/ideas

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- Starting the conversation with folks who already have shared an interest
- Organizing a gathering at your program (e.g. movie screening)
- Inviting other agency programs to join your events
- Inviting organizations to talk about Advanced Directives
- Organizing a gathering outside of your programs
- Memorials/Celebration of Life/Obituaries

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“I loved my friend  
He went away from me  
There's nothing more to say  
The poem ends,  
Soft as it began-  
I loved my friend.”

-Langston Hughes



# Resources

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- The Conversation Project- <https://theconversationproject.org/>
- Reimagine <https://letsreimagine.org/nyc>
- The Compassionate Friends - <https://www.compassionatefriends.org/>
- Pet Loss support group - <https://www.amcny.org/pet-loss-support-program>
- Get Palliative Care <https://getpalliativecare.org/>
- Caring Info <https://www.caringinfo.org/>
- Respecting Choices <https://respectingchoices.org/>
- Death Café - <https://deathcafe.com/>
- Cake - <https://www.joincake.com/company/>