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Peer-support program works to keep DCS workers from burning out

[MARY JO PITZL](#) | ARIZONA REPUBLIC

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Faces of Child Welfare: Arizona Department of Child Safety's Jenny Bilskie-Smith

Jenny Bilskie-Smith, a former Arizona Department of Child Safety case manager, is now a peer-support coordinator with DCS.

DAVID WALLACE, THE REPUBLIC | AZCENTRAL.COM

Doctors do it. So do police. And firefighters, and other first-responders.

These frontline, stressful occupations have peer-support networks to help workers talk out their problems. But as one child-welfare worker who was struggling with burnout learned, her profession didn't have one.

Jenny Bilskie-Smith set out to do something about that. She started a support program at the Department of Child Safety, drawing on the lessons from other professions and building on research about the effects of witnessing trauma and its effects.



Jenny Bilskie-Smith, a former Arizona Department of Child Safety case manager, is now a peer-support coordinator with DCS. She is seen on the street in ... **Show more** ▼

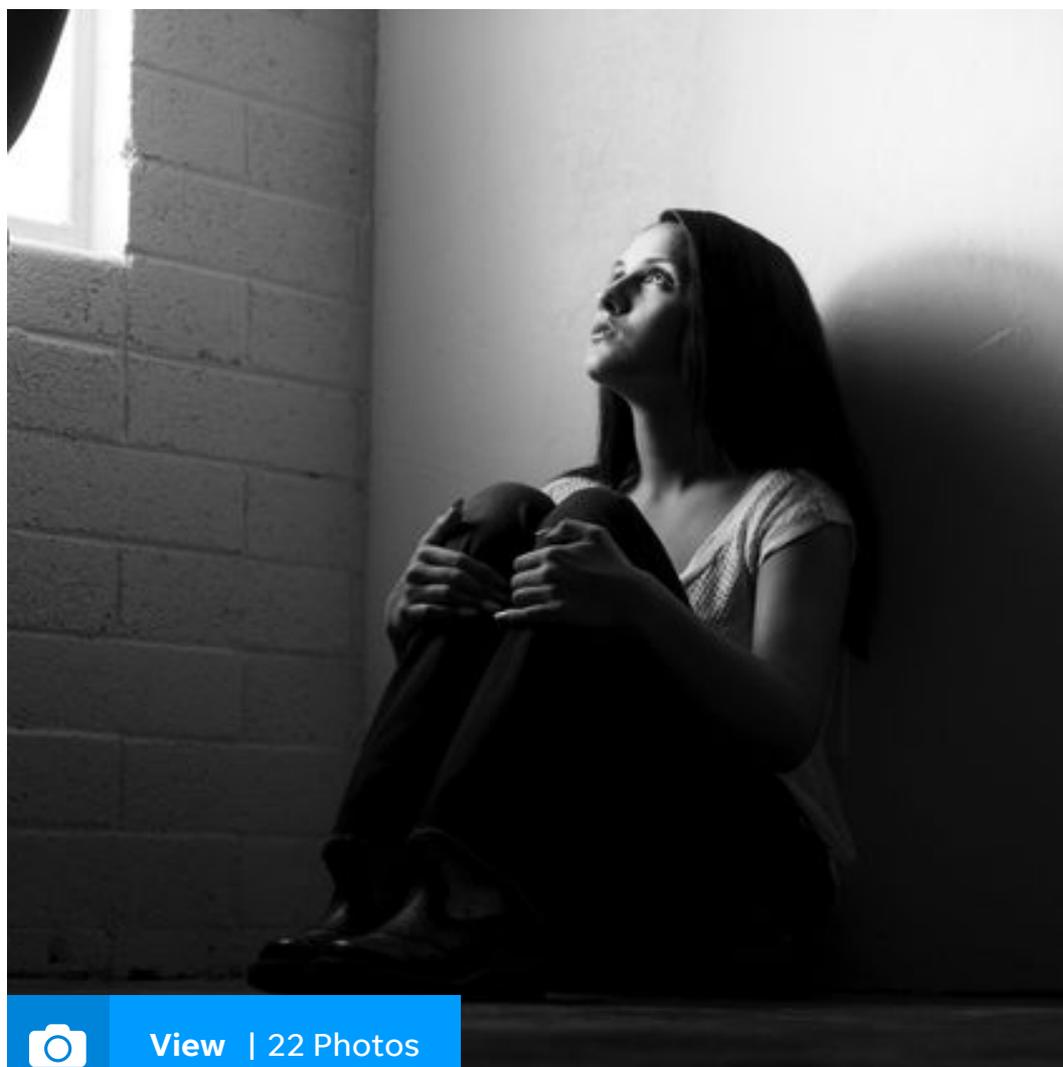
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She wanted to combat the draining feelings that she and her colleagues felt as they dealt with child abuse and neglect, frantic parents, demanding lawyers and constant reports.

"It was difficult for me to understand that this thing that I'm feeling, this is the definition of burnout," Bilskie-Smith, then a case supervisor, said. "Unfortunately, we

didn't have a lot of resources at the time.”

Peers, not formal counselors



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Faces of Child Welfare

DCS, like many large employers, has a formal Employee Assistance Program with counselors and therapists.

“But quite frankly,” Bilskie-Smith said, “it’s easier to talk to somebody who knows what it’s like to do the work that you’re doing when you’re trying to navigate the complications of secondary stress and burnout.”

Studies have shown that people in stressful occupations are more likely to turn to colleagues to blow off steam than to sit down with a trained counselor.



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Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston and the Harvard Medical School launched a peer support program when research that showed doctors rarely turned to the formal counseling programs available to them—largely because they were reticent to talk to non-physicians.

The same holds true for first-responders, according to Jeffrey T. Mitchell and George S. Everly Jr., two first responders-turned-academics.

When they realized that police, firefighters and others were more likely to talk with people who understood their world than any formal type of counseling, they created a peer-support model for their former profession. Mitchell is a clinical associate professor at the University of Maryland's Emergency Health Services Department and Everly Jr. has taught at Harvard Medical School and Johns Hopkins.

Who knows it better?

It makes sense to turn to peers when work gets stressful, said Dori DiPietro, president of the National Association of Social Workers and director of the social work program at Mesa Community College.

"The camaraderie of social workers with social workers is very healing," she said. "We get each other."

A former child-welfare investigator herself, DiPietro said social workers are trained to deal with difficult situations.

"We can handle that," she said. "It's all those piddly little calls and emails."

Debriefing from the stress





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From constant meeting reminders to the distress of seeing an abused child, Bilskie-Smith saw the toll that work was taking on her colleagues.

The Workforce Resilience program, which Bilskie-Smith now heads, launched in May. It pairs stressed-out workers with a colleague who has been trained in secondary trauma. They have to be good listeners who can bring a "been there, done that" empathy to the job.

Lisa Burns is one of those people.

"It's really about being able to debrief," said Burns, an investigator with the agency's Office of Child Welfare Investigations. "You let the individual guide the talk."

Steve Hammons left his job as a child-welfare investigator in 2014, eight months into the job.

"You're going out in the community, including in some rough areas, talking to a wide range of people, sometimes criminals," Hammons said.

Having access to someone who had walked in his shoes would have helped ease the stress, he said.

Warding off anger, bitterness

Providing that "someone" is the idea, Bilskie-Smith said. She was there herself.

Her work as a case manager, dealing with families whose children had been removed

her work as a case manager, dealing with families whose children had been removed due to neglect — or worse, abuse — was taking a toll.



I just started to live with this sense of impending doom. Like what if something horrible happens on one of my cases?

Jenny Bilskie-Smith, a former Arizona Department of Child Safety case manager

"I just started to live with this sense of impending doom," she recalled. "Like what if something horrible happens on one of my cases?"

Later, as a supervisor, the same worries nagged at her. What if something blows up? What if one of her charges gets mentioned in the news media?

"I started to have this personality shift. I kind of became this person who was bitter and angry and less engaged," she said.

Rather than dwell there, she decided to leave the field and search for something new. The result was a lot of research on burnout and how other professions deal with it.

She pitched the idea of a peer-to-peer support program and her supervisor, Deputy Director Shalom Jacobs, gave her the green light.

A walk around the block

Bilskie-Smith was worried people would stay away out of fear their participation might get back to management (it won't, she says) or that it would make them look weak.

But people have reached out, and increasingly the contacts are initiated by staffers, rather than through referrals from a colleague or supervisor. Last month, the program served 59 people.

The meetings can happen anywhere: On the phone, during a walk around the block, after hours. And it can cover anything, even topics that have nothing to do with DCS, such as problems at home, Bilskie-Smith said.

The program has 37 volunteers who represent a range of jobs within DCS, as well as a variety of locations. All have had training in dealing with secondary trauma and

burnout.

Not so easy to brush off



Republic series explores Arizona child-welfare system

Reporter Mary Jo Pitzl outlines The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com's series examining child-welfare. David Wallace/The Republic

Taylor Ferguson is one of the peer volunteers. He was an investigator — the frontline staffers who make initial contact with a family — and said such a program would have helped him in his early years, even with a supportive supervisor.

"I've been called every name in the book," he said. While it's easy to think you can brush off such things, the words stick with you. It helps to blow off steam with an understanding colleague, rather than letting that boil up into frustration and burnout, Ferguson said.

And that's the idea, Bilskie-Smith said.

"What I wanted to do at first was just help people see, clearly, that this is what's happening to them, so they could take the action to resolve it."

By [David Wallace](#) and [Mary Jo Pitzl](#) for The Arizona Republic. Photo by [David Wallace](#) for The Arizona Republic.

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About this report

The stress associated with being a caseworker is just one aspect of the state's child-welfare system. A three-year grant from the Arizona Community Foundation supports in-depth research on the topic at The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com.

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