

Suggestions for building sibling support

Edited from SLN's A Guide for Sibling Chapters

The mission of the Sibling Leadership Network (SLN) is to provide siblings of individuals with disabilities the information, support, and tools to advocate with their brothers and sisters and to promote the issues important to them and their entire families.

Who are Siblings?

- SLN welcomes siblings of a person with any type of disability (including a physical, intellectual, developmental, cognitive, psychological, learning or other disability). We often use the term “sibling” instead of writing out the full “sibling of people with disabilities” each time.
- Once a sibling, always a sibling. We warmly welcome siblings whose brother or sister with a disability has passed away. We have many members who have joined the SLN long after their brother or sister with disabilities has died.
- The SLN also recognizes the important roles of “Sib-in-laws”, who are people who partner with and/or marry someone who has a sibling with a disability. Siblings recognize that sib-in-laws are very important in our lives and often provide support to us individually as well as sometimes to our brothers and sisters with disabilities and our whole families.
- There often are relatives, for example cousins, with sibling-like relationships who are interested in collaboration with siblings.

State Sibling Chapters

There are currently 26 state sibling chapters and they are the grassroots of the national SLN. Chapters provide connections for siblings to get peer support and information. Many state chapters have regional groups that meet throughout the state. Each state chapter has its own feel and flavor. One main purpose of sibling chapters is to provide a judgment free atmosphere for siblings to meet each other and share their sibling experiences. A judgment free zone allows siblings to share stories that they may not be able to share with other groups.

How to provide sibling support in your region

- Many chapters primarily host **sibling support groups**. This may look different in different places. In some chapters, it is a quiet discussion in a social service organization's basement or a sibling's home. In some chapters, it is a more lively social interaction at a restaurant. In a variety of settings, the purpose is to connect with other siblings, share experiences, and provide a judgement free atmosphere where people feel welcome to talk.
 - The first sibling support meeting is often an informal time to meet and greet. It is helpful to agree that what is talked about at the meeting stays at the meeting. A good icebreaker is to simply ask siblings to introduce themselves and say something about their sibling

experience. Allow time to discuss when and where the next meeting will take place. Identify who may be willing to help with the next steps. Be sure to gather the contact information from all those attending and encourage them to promote the next meeting. After the meeting, send out a summary of what was covered at the meeting and include reminders to individuals who volunteered for any tasks.

- Occasionally other family members like parents are interested in joining a sibling group, but sibling support meetings should promote the sibling perspective and to allow siblings to feel comfortable in sharing their own experience.
 - It can be very helpful to have a sibling from an already existing group or the state chapter attend, if possible.
 - Sibling groups have been held in homes, restaurants, library community rooms, and coffee shops. If you choose a public spot, make sure it is conversation-friendly, has ample parking or public transportation available, and is accessible.
 - It may be helpful to have handouts to share with siblings, including the Texas Knowledge Translation Product and Texas Resource for Siblings of People with Disabilities.
- Your chapter may want to host events that showcase speakers to allow siblings to learn more about relevant topics like future planning, family dynamics, and policy issues.
 - As your chapter grows, you may be interested in providing education about sibling issues to broader audiences. A conference could be hosted or siblings could offer to speak at a conference.
 - For chapters or regions that are interested in supporting younger brothers or sisters, Sibshops could be hosted. <https://www.siblingsupport.org/about-sibshops>

How to find siblings in your region

Finding siblings may require some effort! Though there are established networks of people with disabilities and families who receive services, information does not always reach siblings.

- Start close to home. Are your parents involved with any groups that bring together families? Where does your brother or sister with disabilities get support or services?
- You might also consider contacting the Arc in your state or county, the UCEDD (University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities), Partners in Policy Making, Centers for Independent Living, and Developmental Disabilities Councils.
- Connect with professionals to spread the word about your group. Some examples include: advocacy or provider organizations for people with disabilities, health care professionals, school professionals, special needs lawyers and financial planners, and similar professionals.
- Connect with your state chapter for a list of siblings in your area.
- Attend local conferences and Sibshop trainings.
- Use social media – Twitter, Facebook, and Meetup.
- Sibnet on Facebook is a great place to connect with siblings.
- When you are reaching out to siblings it is important to consider your definition of siblings.

Communication

- A good communication system is critical to staying in touch! Figuring out a process to capture who is a part of your group, as well as communicating to the group, is a key part of building the group. It is important to create an **internal contact list**. Collect names, phone numbers, and email addresses to develop your list. When you are having an event, invite all of the siblings you have in your group. You can use emails, social media and announcements from supportive agencies to advertise your meeting. Closed Facebook pages, Meetups and a listserv can be used for internal communications. Sibling

support groups should identify that they are affiliated with their state chapter by displaying the logo and mission of the state organization on communications.

- External communications help get the word out about your group and can also help you grow. Social media like Facebook, Meetup, Eventbrite, Twitter, and LinkedIn are all options. Additionally, newsletters and blogs can help create awareness and grow your group. Your state SLN chapter may be interested in promoting your events through their networks as well. Often other organizations are willing to share links to your information with their networks.

Tips from chapter leaders across the country:

- If you are meeting at a restaurant/bar, try to find a space that has a separate section that would allow for better communication.
- Nametags are often appreciated!
- Don't be afraid to ask for help planning events. Siblings in your group might have special connections to a location that could host (restaurant or organization), or they might offer a special skill/hobby that others would enjoy, or they may have ideas that you hadn't considered.
- Be responsive to what siblings want, not just meetings, conference, but other opportunities to meet.
- Identify how siblings can contribute their skills, interests, as well as financial resources.
- Always considering diversity in all aspects (disabilities, geographical, gender, generational, ethnicity, etc.)
- Don't get discouraged if events start small. Growth takes time. Some great friendships between siblings have happened at smaller events.
- Consider using a Doodle or send an email to determine the best time for people in your group to get together. Some chapters have great success with lunch gatherings, others focus on evening or weeknight events.