



SUPPORT COMMITTEE REPORT

Fiscal Year April 1, 2024 thru March 31, 2025

Our strong and vibrant Dysphonia International support leadership volunteers selflessly donate their time, talent, and energy to our community. We know that feeling connected to others in our community can have a strong impact on health, physically and emotionally. Supporting people with spasmodic dysphonia and related voice conditions has been an important pillar of the Dysphonia International mission since our founding in 1989. For the past 36 years, we have remained steadfast in our mission, and we are the only organization which is dedicated solely to spasmodic dysphonia and related voice conditions.

Dysphonia International provides support by:

1. Establishing and maintaining an international network of Support Groups and Area Contact Leaders;
2. Publishing and producing books, brochures, articles, DVDs and other resources;
3. Sponsoring on-line initiatives including a Facebook Leadership Group and a presence on social media – including Facebook, Instagram, X, YouTube, and LinkedIn;
4. Publishing a quarterly on-line Newsletter, *Voices of Support* which highlights the support activities of the organization;
5. Hosting virtual, in-person, and hybrid meetings

There are currently approximately 30 SD support groups and approximately 75 Area Contact Leaders. Mary Bifaro and Carol Doles serve as resources for new and existing support group leaders. Area Contact Leaders have a Director, Dennis Kaszeta, who keeps in touch with them. Pat Hill serves as Area Contact Communications Coordinator. There are two Regional Coordinators who work with leaders in their Regions – one for Eastern & Canada (Carol Doles) and the other for Western & Canada (John Comer). Dot Sowerby serves on the Internet Welcome Committee. In addition, there is a Board of Directors with 12 members as well as an Honorary Board, a Medical Advisory Board, and a Scientific Advisory Board. Our headquarters staff consists of our full-time Executive Director, Kim Kuman; our full-time Program & Operations Manager, Nicole Leitner; and our part-time Project Advisor, Nancy Panos. Each member of our vibrant support network is a valuable patient advocate and integral to our success.

The updated Dysphonia International website (dysphonia.org) is comprehensive and interactive. It allows people to listen to voice samples, meet our members, find a support group, locate a healthcare professional who treats SD and related voice conditions, view a video and photo gallery, read about Dysphonia International, treatment options for SD and related voice conditions, learn about the latest developments of our organization, and buy printed materials. It has a blog which tells stories about living with spasmodic dysphonia and related voice conditions in a personal way.

In addition, Dysphonia International launched a Support Leadership Facebook group in February 2017. A Question of the Week is posted, and it has served as a way for leaders to communicate with each other. This group currently has 106 members. Its administrators are: Executive Director, Kim Kuman; Program & Operations Manager, Nicole Leitner; Support Network Director, Mary Bifaro; and Eastern Region & Canada Coordinator, Carol Doles. We also have an extensive on-line reference library with resources for our leaders. It is one of the tools that Dysphonia International uses to assist our support leadership volunteers in their important work.

Voices of Support

Dysphonia International recently published its 76th quarterly newsletter *Voices of Support* which reports on the important activities of our support volunteers and is sent to all leaders in our ever-growing network. Our support leaders are quoted directly, and their photos are included whenever possible. We report on the important work that they are engaged in. The passion and empathy of our leaders is on full display. Some of the sections of the newsletter are: Fundraising; Awareness Raising; Representation at Medical Conferences; Tips for/from our Leaders; Additional Work by our Leaders; Topics and Presentations for Support Group Meetings; Area Contact Leader Corner; Support Group Leader Corner; Exploring our Website; Guest Speaker Program; Podcast Program; and Champion Corner. During any given quarter, between 20 and 25 groups meet either virtually, in-person, or hybrid. Some of our groups have combined with contiguous states. Our members have been informed that they can attend any virtual meeting they choose regardless of their location.

Continuity of Key Support Leaders

We are fortunate to have maintained continuity of our key support network leaders for years. Mary Bifaro continues in her role as Dysphonia International Support Network Director. She enjoys editing *Voices of Support* which helps her stay in touch with many of our leaders. She also interacts with our leaders through our monthly support network calls. Our two Regional Coordinators – John Comer (Western & Canada); and Carol Doles (Eastern & Canada) are still serving in their roles. Area Contact Communications Coordinator, Pat Hill, enjoys her network of Area Contact Leaders. Dennis Kaszeta is enthusiastic in his role of Area Contact Director. Dot Sowerby continues to work in on-line support.

Growth of our Support Network

The Dysphonia International office maintains a listing of our SD support groups. Our two Regional Coordinators are contacted for their input. Many support group leaders want to serve as Area Contact Leaders after they have stepped down as Support Group Leaders. Fortunately, we have had changes in leadership of our support groups after a successor has been identified. However, there are gaps where groups have not been able to find a replacement leader, and we continue to work to reinvigorate those groups. We have been successful in launching a few new support groups. New support network leaders continue to be added because of our recent push for engagement. Overall, Support Group development and Area Contact Leader development is still a work in progress.

Fundraising

The response to our fifth Walk for Talk Event held over four days last October exceeded our wildest expectations! We never felt more connected. We had over 700 donors, 37 sponsors, and 18 in-person events. We saw an increased number of sponsors, healthcare professionals, researchers, and SLP students participating. We met many new people and strengthened relationships. A total of \$125,910 was raised – which was matched – for a combined total of \$251,820! The sixth Walk for Talk event is scheduled to take place from October 16-19, 2025.

2025 In-Person Leadership Workshop

All leaders have been invited to attend a half-day In-Person Leadership Workshop. Serving on the Planning Committee are: Kim Kuman, Nicole Leitner, Nancy Panos, Mary Bifaro, Carol Doles, and Sue Payne. The workshop will be a hands-on, interactive program, complete with breakout rooms. It is the 21st annual Leadership Program presented by Dysphonia International. We look at the workshop as an opportunity to recognize and thank our tireless leaders for their outstanding service. The theme acronym for this year is: PHOENIX: Promoting Hope, Open Engagement and Networking for Inclusive Xcellence.

Recent Changes

We have created onboarding forms for all levels of our support leadership network. Our annual reconfirmation process of our support network leaders has helped us to energize and become further

acquainted with our volunteers. In 2023, we started a series of monthly meetings for our Support Group Leaders and Area Contact Leaders which are recorded. To date, we have held 26 meetings. We formalized and expanded our Guest Speaker Program and are developing our Podcast Program. We added Board Member from FL, Sue Payne, to our Support Committee.

The SMART Goals for FY 2025 of the Support Committee included four deliverables which have all been completed. There were two ACL-led virtual meetings, each facilitated by two different Area Contact Leaders. There was a third international ACL-led virtual meeting which was facilitated by two Area Contact Leaders in the UK. In addition, we had a virtual leadership workshop on discovering our leadership personality. All four meetings were successful and informative. Kim Kuman and Nicole Leitner organized the sessions. Sue Payne brought us her former colleague, Trish Jordan, a leadership and career coach, who facilitated the virtual workshop pro bono.

As a result of this year's SMART goals, we introduced a new program to expand our support meetings which created open conversations and opportunities to connect. It has been well-received.

Closing

Our Dysphonia International Leaders serve our community with energy, enthusiasm, and empathy. They have had articles written about their events and their dysphonia journeys. They are passionate about advocacy work. They write articles and serve as guest speakers. They want to know how best to grow and maintain their support group communities and contacts in their area. They are concerned about burnout and want to know more about running effective meetings. They work to ensure that people living with SD and related voice disorders feel connected to our community. They do so in a positive and supportive way.

In short, our Dysphonia International leaders want to learn from one another about how to succeed and benefit us all. They have a lot to say. They are motivational and inspirational. They look to the work of past leaders with gratitude, and they look to the future of serving our members in the best way possible. They share and they care. They speak with one loud and clear voice and they want everyone with SD and related voice conditions to know that they are not alone. They need Dysphonia International and Dysphonia International needs them. The hard work, dedication, and personal commitment made by our members, leaders, and supporters over the years have become a hallmark of who we are – and the strength in our success. Our support leadership network helps to drive and shape our organization.

The theme of 2025 World Voice Day is, “EMPOWER YOUR VOICE”. This motto reminds us all of the importance of the voice and our need to take care of our vocal health. Dysphonia International encourages those with spasmodic dysphonia and related voice conditions to not let that stop you from making a difference and living your life fully. Dysphonia International has made great strides in its 36-year history. We are a community that cares about you and your voice. Our reach is international, and we have expanded our mission to include related voice conditions.

Mindful of the important work that lies ahead, grateful for the many leaders in our support leadership network, together, we will continue to reach onward and upward. Never underestimate the power of being there for just one person with SD or a related voice condition. We are all in this fight together. We are not SD or related voice conditions, but we are the spokespersons for Dysphonia International. Let us continue to have our voices heard.

I am constantly reminded of our dedicated support network volunteers who have stood side by side with one hope and one dream – to help improve the lives of those affected by spasmodic dysphonia and related voice conditions. They are the backbone of our organization, and they continue in their passion-driven service.

I'd like to thank the Board for the privilege of allowing me to continue to serve as Support Network Director. This is the 21st consecutive year that I have given a Support Report to the NSDA Board. I want to express my thanks to fellow members of the Executive Committee (Charlie Reavis, Susan Beck, Bev Matthews, and Charlie Womble) as well as fellow members of the Support Committee (John Comer, Carol Doles, Dennis Kaszeta, Pat Hill, Dot Sowerby, David Barton, and Sue Payne). In addition, I am most grateful to our hardworking and talented staff, including Executive Director Kim Kuman, Program and Operations Manager Nicole Leitner, and Program Advisor Nancy Panos. They are all professional and caring in dealing with leaders and members alike.

Respectfully submitted,
Mary Bifaro
Support Network Director
Dysphonia International
March, 2025