

Core Competencies for PrEP Peer Workers

New York State Peer Worker Certification Program in HIV, HCV, Harm Reduction and PrEP

Background Regarding These Competencies

The effectiveness of PrEP peer workers is rooted in the fact that they share a common “lived experience” with their clients. As a result, PrEP peer workers have a unique capacity to provide targeted services that can inspire, empower and support individuals in need of PrEP and related HIV prevention services. Peer workers provide a unique category of service delivery through the lens of “shared lived experience” which is distinct from the roles and services of other members of a multi-disciplinary care or prevention team. The following is a list of key competencies that a certified PrEP peer worker will demonstrate, depending on their work setting. Organizations employing PrEP peer workers should consider the concept of “shared lived experience” and review this list of competencies when defining the specific job description as well as when recruiting, hiring, and supervising PrEP peer workers. To become certified, an individual must have the “lived experience” of taking PrEP. **Note:** a person who is living with HIV who does PrEP work may be certified as an HIV Peer Worker to perform PrEP competencies by completing a practicum and carrying out the PrEP competencies.

This experience enables PrEP peer workers to empathize appropriately with priority populations and effectively assist them with PrEP. While this entire list of competencies is required to achieve certification, it is anticipated that an individual peer worker’s job description would not encompass all of these competencies, but rather, would focus on one or more of these key areas of work.

General Competencies

All certified PrEP peer workers are responsible for demonstrating the specific competencies outlined below, regardless of work setting or job description.

- Shares their personal experience in a strategic, compassionate and responsive manner and comfortably discloses status
- Demonstrates a commitment to personal self-management of health conditions.
- Addresses health literacy needs of clients to ensure client understanding of messages delivered.
- Communicates using a person-centered approach such as active listening, stages of change, motivational interviewing and/or harm reduction counseling.
- Understands and upholds agency confidentiality policies and procedures.
- Recognizes own vulnerabilities and emotional responses to work-related matters and identifies strategies for managing the situation, including asking for help from supervisor(s) and/or other available supports.
- Recognizes the limits of their knowledge and seeks assistance from supervisor, other staff, or other available supports when needed.
- Seeks opportunities to increase knowledge and skills for peer support.
- Employs self-care strategies to promote wellness and prevent “burn-out”.
- Demonstrates appropriate oral, written and non-verbal communication skills.
- Develops awareness of and manages own personal biases and triggers when dealing with participant, as required for their specific worksite.

- Relates to participants via his/her shared lived experience in a respectful, non-judgmental way.
- Has a basic understanding of HIV, HCV, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Specialized Competencies

Based on the specific work setting and job description, PrEP peer workers may be responsible for some or all of the specific competencies outlined below.

Employs a non-judgmental, sex positive approach

PrEP peer workers possess the knowledge, attitudes and skills needed to employ a non-judgmental, sex positive approach during all interactions with clients. All certified PrEP peer workers are responsible for demonstrating the specific knowledge, attitudes and skills outlined below, regardless of their work setting or job description.

Knowledge

- Is knowledgeable about the different dimensions of sexuality, including: sex for procreation; sex for pleasure; sex for intimacy; sex for spirituality; sex as a form of social exchange (for example, transactional sex or sex in exchange for money, food, housing, etc.).
- Is knowledgeable about the American Sexual Health Association's definition of sexual health, including the domains of: sexual pleasure; sexual rights/consent; communication with partners and health care providers; access to sexual health information; avoiding STIs and unintended pregnancies; accessing prevention, care and treatment services.
- Is knowledgeable about the human sexual response cycle – often described as attraction, excitement, plateau, orgasm, resolution.
- Is aware of client-centered, culturally sensitive language to refer to the different parts of human genitalia for the clients they serve and their sex partners.
- Is knowledgeable about medical and slang terms for different body parts.
- Is able to describe the female reproductive cycle.
- Can describe biological changes impacting sex and sexuality across the lifespan, including childhood, puberty, adulthood, menopause and older adults.
- Is knowledgeable about the different domains of gender identity and sexual orientation and can clearly distinguish them.
- Is knowledgeable about a wide range of different sexual activities, sexual identities and communities.
- Is knowledgeable about different sex toys that may be used by the population being served.
- Can accurately identify the likelihood of HIV and STI transmission for different sexual behaviors.
- Is knowledgeable about the general history of HIV.
- Is knowledgeable about the signs and symptoms of seroconversion and early HIV.
- Is aware of the symptoms of STIs.
- Is knowledgeable about the power of language around gender, sexuality and sexual orientation and can distinguish between stigmatizing language and affirming language.

Attitudes

- Views consensual human touch and sexuality as important factors for health and happiness.
- Views sexuality as a potentially positive force in a person's life.

- Recognizes the value of skin to skin contact and exchange of body fluids as elements of a pleasurable sexual experience.
- Demonstrates a non-judgmental attitude toward the full range of sexual behaviors.
- Demonstrates a positive attitude about use of biomedical interventions to promote sexual health.
- Open to learning about every client's unique experience of gender, sex and sexuality.
- Accepts that the experience of gender and sexual orientation may be fluid for some individuals.
- Avoids use of scare tactics or fear of HIV/STIs to promote PrEP or any other harm reduction technique.
- Describes HIV as a chronic, manageable health condition and doesn't use fear of death from HIV as a strategy to promote PrEP or other forms of HIV prevention.

Skills

- Able to use personal experience in a strategic manner to explain PrEP as a sex positive option for HIV prevention. (Supervisor must rate this competency)
- Demonstrates comfort talking about the full range of possible sexual behaviors.
- Affirms a client's desire for positive sexual experiences.
- Demonstrates acceptance and non-judgmental attitudes regarding all the different reasons a person engages in sexual behavior.
- Able to ask a client open-ended questions about their sexual desires, experiences and actively listens to responses.
- Able to gather information about a client's sexual behaviors and accurately convey the potential for HIV transmission and acquisition.
- Able to gather information about a client's sexual behaviors and openly discuss the interplay of pleasure and harm reduction options.
- Able to discuss birth control/ contraceptive options with clients in a culturally responsive manner.
- Can describe to clients the symptoms of STIs.
- Demonstrates comfort using either medical terms or slang terms for different parts of human genitalia.
- Demonstrates comfort using either medical terms or slang terms for different sexual behaviors.
- Able to tailor conversations about sexual desire, sexual behavior, pleasure and sexual health to individuals of different ages across the life span.
- Able to explain PrEP as a biomedical intervention that empowers individuals to take charge of their sexual health.
- Able to explain how PrEP can enhance sexual health and pleasure by removing concern about acquiring HIV.
- Describes STIs as episodic, treatable conditions and embraces PrEP as an effective tool for promoting routine comprehensive sexual health care.
- Can explain the history of HIV and why PrEP represents such an important advance.
- Employs affirming language around gender identify, sexuality and sexual orientation.

Explaining PrEP

A central set of competencies required of every PrEP peer worker is the ability to explain PrEP as an individualized intervention in a clear, straight forward way, always applying universal precautions around health literacy. All certified PrEP peer workers, regardless of setting or job description, will demonstrate all of the competencies outlined below:

- Shares their personal experience of taking antiretroviral medication in a strategic manner to explain what PrEP is and to address client questions and concerns about PrEP. (Supervisor must rate this competency)
- Explains that PrEP is an individualized and effective option for HIV prevention and sexual health promotion.
- Explains that PrEP includes: 1) taking medication as prescribed by the health care provider, 2) periodic HIV and STI testing, 3) education about harm reduction options, including condoms to avoid STIs, 4) periodic medical appointments as agreed upon by the provider and the individual, and 5) adherence support, as needed.
- Works as part of the multi-disciplinary team to provide tools and strategies using a client-centered approach to support clients in decision-making around PrEP and PrEP adherence.
- Explains the importance of taking PrEP as prescribed, including explaining decreased efficacy when doses are missed.
- Remains up to date on changing dosing options for PrEP, including daily PrEP, PrEP on demand/intermittent PrEP, injectable PrEP as well as other emerging medication regimens, dosing schedules, etc.
- Encourages individuals who are using or considering alternative dosing schedules to discuss it with the prescriber.
- Explains that PrEP does not protect against STIs.
- Able to discuss the role of condom use for STI prevention and the importance of regular STI screening.
- Demonstrates respect for each client's attitudes and prior experiences with condom use.
- Uses a non-judgmental approach to supporting individuals in making informed decisions regarding condom use.
- Explains the length of time a person has to take PrEP to achieve protection for different dosing schedules and different sexual activities, such as anal intercourse and vaginal intercourse.
- Reinforces the need for periodic follow-up appointments with the prescribing health care provider.
- Refers individuals/ couples interested in PrEP for conception to a health care provider.
- Can interpret the results of an HIV test.
- Able to describe the potential side effects of PrEP and strategies for addressing them.
- Able to discuss with a client the benefits and challenges of PrEP.
- Able to support a client in deciding whether PrEP is right for them.
- Able to connect individuals interested in PrEP to a medical provider that prescribes PrEP.
- Helps clients to explore their thoughts, feelings or concerns around PrEP and stigma.
- Stays current regarding community trends and perceptions regarding the use of PrEP as a biomedical intervention.

- Helps clients explore their thoughts, feeling and concerns around disclosing or not disclosing to partners that they are taking PrEP.
- Assists clients with making informed choices regarding disclosure to others that they are taking PrEP, taking into consideration the individual’s concern about stigma.
- Assists clients with disclosing to their sexual or needle sharing partners that they are taking PrEP.
- Provides emotional support and reassurance to people who are taking PrEP but continue to have high levels of anxiety or fear of acquiring HIV.
- Discusses “seasons of risk” and provides accurate information about how to discontinue PrEP.
- Directs an individual to different sources of support or information about PrEP, including on-line resources, DOH materials, clinic resources and other local resources.
- Strategically shares personal experience of using PrEP for HIV prevention to assist client with decision making, adherence, disclosure issues or discontinuing PrEP.

Navigating PrEP Financial Assistance Programs

Understanding and addressing the different costs associated with PrEP may be a significant obstacle to starting PrEP. In some cases, certified PrEP peer workers are involved in this work and, in some cases, this is the responsibility of other members of the care team. Based on the specific work setting and job description, certified PrEP peer workers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the competencies outlined below:

- Can explain that all insurers, except for certain grandfathered health plans, must provide coverage for PrEP for the prevention of HIV infection at no cost sharing and also cover screening for HIV infection at no cost-sharing.
- Describes the different costs associated with PrEP, including the cost of medication, medical appointments and lab work.
- Can refer clients to the AIDS Institute’s up to date [Payment Options for Adults and Adolescents for PrEP](#), explaining that PrEP can be an affordable option for anyone.
- Explains that Fee-for-Service Medicaid covers PrEP and that the Initial prescription does not require pre-authorization but for refills the patient must have an HIV negative test documented within the last 90 days. Explains that Medicaid Managed Care Plans (MMCPs) cover PrEP for adults and adolescents and that prior authorization requirements may vary among plans.
- Explains that PrEP-AP covers the cost of health care appointment and lab work for financially eligible individuals.
- Describes the Patient Assistance Programs that help pay for medication or medication co-pays.
- Able to refer an individual to someone who can assist with navigating the cost of PrEP, if the peer worker’s responsibilities do not include this.

Client Self-Management and Adherence:

Based on the specific work setting and job description, certified PrEP peer workers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the specific competencies outlined below:

- Shares their personal experience of taking PrEP or ART in a strategic manner to support client self-management and adherence. (Supervisor must rate this competency)

- Relates their own and/or others' life experiences (while respecting privacy) to clients to inspire hope and empowerment.
- Models positive self-management behaviors.
- Works as part of the care team to help the client develop self-management goals, provide coaching and track progress meeting these goals.
- Assists clients in voicing concerns or questions to members of the care team.
- Educates clients about health, wellness, treatment adherence and available support services.
- Validates client's life experiences and feelings and celebrates client's efforts and accomplishments.
- Recognizes and responds to the complexities and uniqueness of each client's process of treatment adherence and tailor services and support to meet the preferences and unique needs of each client.
- Recognizes and responds to competing priorities and life events that may impact self-management, such as: co-morbid conditions; child care; employment; legal issues, substance use.

Explaining PEP

Certified PrEP peer workers may be called on to address PEP in at least two different circumstances: 1) when a person is seeking PrEP has had a recent high-risk exposure requiring PEP; and, 2) in cases where a person has completed one or more courses of PEP and can benefit from the more proactive approach of PrEP. Based on the specific work setting and job description, certified PrEP peer workers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the competencies outlined below:

- Explains the role of PEP in preventing HIV after a possible exposure to HIV.
- Conveys the specific behaviors/ exposures that meet the criteria for starting PEP.
- Explains that PEP should be started as soon as possible after the exposure, but not later than 72 hours after the exposure.
- Refers an individual who can benefit from PEP to the emergency department, NYS Sexual Health Clinic or call the appropriate hotline based on their location: NYC PEP hotline at 844-373-7692; Outside NYC: 844-737-4669.
- Explains that when a person calls the PEP hotline, a health care provider will assess the risk exposure to determine if PEP is appropriate and, if so, will explain how to take PEP, call the prescription in to a pharmacy near the caller, and set up an appointment for follow-up care in the person's community.
- Describes the potential side effects of PEP and strategies for addressing them.
- Reinforces the importance of completing the 28-day course of PEP medication.
- Provides emotional support and referrals to mental health counseling in cases where a person starting PEP is experiencing trauma or a high level of anxiety as a result of the exposure.
- Explains to individuals who are currently taking PEP, that PrEP is an important prevention option to consider after completing the PEP regimen, if they remain HIV negative.
- Helps individuals who have completed PEP and have a negative HIV test at four weeks post-exposure, to make a seamless transition to PrEP if they determine it is right for them.
- Directs an individual to different sources of support or information about PrEP, including on-line resources, DOH materials, clinic resources and other local resources.

Sharing Harm Reduction Strategies

Education about harm reduction options is a standard component of PrEP. Certified PrEP peer workers discuss HIV/STI/HCV harm reduction options for sexual behaviors and substance use behaviors. Certified PrEP peer workers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the specific competencies outlined below:

- Gathers information about the details of a client's sexual behaviors and offer harm reduction options tailored to the individual.
- Describes sexual harm reduction options for anal intercourse or anal play including: comfort, pleasure and pain considerations; liberal use of lubrication; use of male or female condoms; and strategic positioning.
- Describes sexual harm reduction options for vaginal intercourse or vaginal play including: comfort, pleasure and pain considerations; liberal use of lubrication; use of male or female condoms; and strategic positioning.
- Shares strategies to help clients communicate with sexual partners about what they are willing to, or not willing to, participate in.
- Shares harm reduction options in the context of sex parties or clubs, including the importance of good nutrition and hydration.
- Shares harm reduction strategies in the context of sex work.
- Shares harm reduction strategies in the context of substance use
- Shares harm reduction strategies in the context of exchanging sex for drugs, a place to stay, or other basic life needs.
- Able to discuss safety considerations when meeting partners online.
- Promotes and provides referrals to a wide range of harm reduction, health promotion and social services including syringe exchange, safer injection practices, opioid overdose prevention, counseling about alcohol use, safer sex practices, condom availability, smoking cessation, STI screening and treatment and others as needed by the client
- Distributes or refers clients to HIV/STI/viral hepatitis educational resources, evidence-based prevention interventions and other prevention services/resources

Addressing Trauma, Sexual Assault and Intimate partner violence

Given the high prevalence of sexual violence and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), it is likely that PrEP peer workers will interact with clients who are dealing with past, current, or possible future sexual assault or IPV. Unless otherwise trained or certified, PrEP peer workers are not rape crisis counselors, domestic violence services providers or mental health counselors. Certified PrEP peer workers focus on staying within their scope of practice when addressing sexual assault or IPV with clients. All certified PrEP peer workers demonstrate the competencies outlined below:

- Maintain a supportive, compassionate attitude when a client reports past, current or concern about possible future sexual assault or IPV.
- In any situation where a client is in imminent danger, the PrEP peer worker consults with a supervisor or other senior member of the care team about how to proceed.
- Identify resources for sexual assault and IPV and refer clients to these services when needed.
- Explain to a client that PrEP may be an effective HIV prevention option in cases where an individual is afraid of a partner or not able to otherwise negotiate safer sex.

- Utilize a strengths-based approach to protect the client’s independence, resilience, wellbeing, and ability to make choices, that allow the client to lead and be in control.

Addressing the Interplay of Sexuality and Substance Use

It is well established that many people at highest risk for HIV intentionally combine sex and substance use to enhance sexual desire, pleasure or performance. PrEP peer workers are likely to encounter clients who use alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, methamphetamine, ecstasy, erectile dysfunction drugs and other designer/club drugs during sex. PrEP peer workers are able to assist clients who combine substance use and sexual behavior and, based on their work setting and job description, may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the specific competencies outlined below:

- Recall the impact of different substances on sexual desire, pleasure and performance.
- Maintain a nonjudgmental attitude regarding the use of substances to engage in sex or enhance the sexual experience.
- Provide harm reduction options and referrals to individuals seeking help for methamphetamine use or abuse.
- Offer sexual harm reduction strategies for individuals engaged in prolonged sex during periods of substance use, including: liberal use of lube to reduce the possibility of tearing or abrasions; explaining the importance of good hydration and nutrition; and describing self-care strategies to promote health after periods of prolonged partying.

Explaining a Status Neutral Approach to HIV including, HIV Treatment as Prevention (TasP) and Undetectable =Untransmittable (U=U)

PrEP peer workers promote a status neutral approach to HIV. They are aware of TasP and U=U and actively promote each to reduce HIV stigma, help clients understand HIV transmission and non-transmission, and promote client empowerment. Based on their work setting or job description, PrEP peer workers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the specific competencies outlined below:

- Promote a status neutral approach to HIV, emphasizing that regardless of a person’s status, there are options for every person’s situation.
- Explain that when a person living with HIV is virally suppressed for six months or longer that there is effectively no risk of passing HIV to partner through sex.
- Assist people living with HIV and their sex partners in understanding and getting comfortable with the facts regarding U=U.
- Explain that U=U applies to sexual behavior but does not apply to sharing injection equipment or breastfeeding.
- Support couples with developing an HIV prevention plan that includes U=U, PrEP or both, based on the comfort of both partners.

Case Conferencing:

Certified PrEP peer workers participate in case conferences to discuss the needs of individual clients and to report out on their work with the client. Based on the specific work setting and job description, PrEP peer workers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the specific competencies outlined below:

- Works as member of multi-disciplinary team to retain clients in care by addressing barriers to PrEP and needed supportive services.

- Provides a brief summary of their work with the client, including reporting on psycho-social issues, barriers or facilitators to care.
- Conveys their point of view in a respectful way when working with colleagues.
- Recognizes the limits of their knowledge and seeks assistance from others when needed.

Documentation and Record-Keeping:

Certified PrEP peer workers document the services they deliver to clients. Based on the specific work setting and job description, certified PrEP peer workers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the specific competencies outlined below:

- Respects confidentiality of client records and follows all agency policies for handling client records.
- Works with other members of the care team to interpret data and patient information to make appropriate decisions regarding the care of the patient.
- Documents services provided to the client in the client record, in accordance with agency policies.
- Documents time and effort as needed for billing/ reimbursement practices, in accordance with agency policies.