

Core Competencies for HCV Peer Workers

New York State Department of Health AIDS Institute

Background Regarding These Competencies

The effectiveness of Hepatitis C (HCV) peer workers is rooted in the fact that these workers share a common “lived experience” with clients. As a result, peer workers have a unique capacity to provide targeted services that can inspire, empower and support clients living with, or at risk for, HCV. HCV peer workers, are individuals with the “shared lived experience” of HCV, including individuals with or without treatment experience. Peer workers provide a distinct category of service delivery through the lens of “shared lived experience”, which is different from the roles and services delivered by other members of a multi-disciplinary care or prevention team. The following is a list of core competencies that comprise the full potential scope of activities that a NYS AIDS Institute certified peer worker might be asked to carry out. Organizations employing peers should consider the concept of “shared lived experience” and this list of competencies when creating a specific job description and recruiting HCV peer workers. 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 HCV peer workers are responsible for carrying out the specific competencies outlined below, regardless of the work setting and 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 and treatment regimens
- 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
- 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 staff when needed
- Seeks opportunities to increase knowledge and skills for peer support
- Employs self-care strategies to wellness and prevent “burn-out”
- Demonstrates effective oral, written and non-verbal communication skills appropriate for the work setting
- Develops awareness of and manages own personal biases and triggers when dealing with participant, as required for their specific worksite

- Relates to clients via their shared lived experience, despite the differences that may exist between them

Specialized Competencies:

HCV Testing:

HCV peer workers may serve as part of a multi-disciplinary team delivering HCV testing services, including peer-delivered pre- and post-test counseling messages, conducting CLIA-waived rapid HCV screening tests and providing follow-up sessions with clients who test HCV positive or negative. Based on the specific work setting and job description, HCV peer workers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the specific competencies outlined below:

- Works as part of a multi-disciplinary team to conduct HCV testing
- Explains key points of information about HCV testing, including the differences between the two HCV tests (i.e., HCV antibody screening test and HCV RNA test)
- Reinforces the need for the second HCV test (HCV RNA) to diagnose HCV if the HCV antibody screening test is positive
- Shares personal experiences in a strategic manner to demonstrate to the client the importance of knowing one's HCV status
- Refers clients to testing sites and accompanies as needed

For clients with a positive/reactive HCV test result:

- Explains that client has HCV antibodies, was exposed to HCV at some time, and is probably infected, but additional testing is needed to know for sure
- Explains that the presence of HCV antibodies does not protect from reinfection or super-infection
- Emphasizes the need for getting the second HCV RNA test to confirm (or rule out) active infection
- Works as part of a multi-disciplinary team to arrange and link client to an appointment for follow-up HCV testing and care, following best practices outlined below
- When applicable, uses his or her experience with HCV testing, linkage to care and treatment to help the client understand the importance of attending the follow-up appointment and that HCV is a curable condition for most people

For clients with a negative/nonreactive HCV test result:

- Explains that it can take up to six months for antibodies to become detectable after an HCV exposure
- Explains the need for follow-up testing, if a recent exposure occurred
- Explains that a negative test result does not protect from getting infected in the future
- Explains options for HCV prevention, including safer injection practices and other relevant harm reduction strategies
- Uses a harm reduction approach to help the client choose options that are acceptable to the client and which reduce their risk of HCV infection
- Refers clients who use drugs to syringe exchange program and ESAP

Engagement, Linkage and Retention to Care:

HCV peer workers can play a very important role in engaging, linking and retaining people with confirmed HCV infection to care. HCV peer workers may be involved in outreach into the community, participate in appointment procedures and receive referrals for follow-up from testing programs or through agency in-reach to clients in need of linkage to care. Based on the specific work setting and job description, HCV peer workers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the specific competencies outlined below:

- Uses their personal experience of HCV treatment to explain the importance of participating in HCV health care
- Conducts outreach to people at risk for or living with HCV in the community
- Initiates contact with clients who have missed appointments, discontinued care or who have yet to engage in health care services
- Meets and greets clients who are new to the organization
- Provides a tour of the health care facility, introducing the client to appropriate staff, the location of reception, waiting room and exam rooms
- When engaging and linking a client to an initial health care appointment, accurately communicates, verbally and in writing, the following information: the date, time, location, provider name, information about what to bring to the appointment and any other facility-specific information needed to have a successful appointment
- Based on knowledge of the facility practices, explains to the client what to expect during their first HCV medical appointment, including physical exam, lab work and interactions with staff
- Based on knowledge of the facility practices, explains the procedures to follow when arriving for a health care appointment, including checking in with the receptionist, taking a seat in the waiting room, what to expect as the length of waiting time and shares ideas about what to do while the client is waiting
- Accompanies clients to health care appointments in accordance with job description and agency policies
- Makes follow-up calls regarding attendance at health care appointments including: reminding clients of an appointment; exploring reasons for missing an appointment; assisting clients with re-scheduling an appointment
- Explains the concept of sustained virologic response (SVR) and how achieving SVR will promote the client's health and reduce the chance of transmission to partners
- Informs client about newer therapies that are available, which are interferon-free, have fewer side effects and shorter treatment duration. Explain that cure is possible, and many of these therapies have high cure rates
- Reaches out to engage clients across the whole continuum of the treatment process
- Distributes or refers clients to appropriate hepatitis C educational resources

Hepatitis C Treatment:

HCV peer workers can play an important role working with clients to support HCV treatment initiation and adherence. HCV peer workers reinforce information provided by the health care

provider, and listen to client concerns about treatment, potential side effects and adherence. They work as part of the overall team to provide the client with the knowledge, tools and support needed to achieve a high level of treatment adherence and a sustained virologic response (SVR)/cure. Based on the specific work setting and job description, HCV peer workers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the specific competencies outlined below:

- Uses their experience of HCV treatment options and adherence to motivate the client and demonstrate that a high level of treatment completion is achievable
- Clarifies HCV treatment misconceptions
- Explains that HCV is a curable condition
- Reinforces medical provider's explanation about newer therapies that are available, which are interferon-free, have fewer side effects and shorter treatment duration. Explains that cure is possible, and many of these therapies have high cure rates
- Reinforces the client's understanding that if the client is cured that does not mean that the client cannot be reinfected. For clients who achieve a cure, provides various interventions and resources to prevent HCV reinfection
- Explains that not taking HCV medication as prescribed can result in: 1) poorer health, 2) the medications not working, 3) medication resistance: reduced options for future treatment, and 4) increased likelihood of transmitting the virus to others
- Collaborates with clients to overcome behavioral, structural, and psychosocial barriers to taking their medications
- Works at part of the multi-disciplinary clinical team to provide tools and strategies using a client-centered approach to support clients in taking their medications every day as prescribed
- Refers clients back to health care providers to discuss any issues (i.e. side effects, discontinuation of medication without doctor's knowledge) that may be affecting their ability to adhere to a treatment regimen
- Works as part of a multi-disciplinary team to assess the readiness of the client to begin treatment (other health issues present, mental health, trauma, commitment to treatment, safe place to live while on treatment or keep medications, access to healthy food, time off work, social support, insurance coverage or financial assistance)
- Conveys appropriate expectations for time and other administrative issues it may take to initiate HCV treatment

Patient Navigation:

HCV peer workers can play an important role in helping clients navigate and learn about the health care system as well as the broader service delivery system. Based on their specific job description, HCV peers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the specific competencies outlined below:

- Provides information about available programs and services when engaging or enrolling clients in the community
- Provides a tour of the facility where the patient will receive services
- Provides educational and organizational materials

- Accompanies clients to community activities and appointments and participates in community activities with clients as assigned and approved by supervisor
- Informs new clients about available services and processes
- Assesses barriers and obstacles that may prevent a client from being linked to care. Assists client in taking appropriate action to overcome identified barriers
- Engages providers from HCV care and treatment program and other services, to meet the needs of clients
- Connects and introduces clients to providers, providers to clients and to other HCV clients, as needed while always remembering to ask permission to disclose any of a client's personal health information to others
- Shares information about how to get to the facility via public transportation, car or walking
- Explores any concerns the client may have regarding personal safety while getting to, or navigating around, the health care facility

Client Self-Management:

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

- 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, sustained virologic response (SVR), and available support services
- Recognizes treatment adherence and completion
- Validates client's life experiences and feelings and celebrates client's efforts and accomplishments
- Recognizes and responds to the complexities and uniqueness of each peer's process of treatment adherence, including stage of disease and treatment outcomes, and tailors services and support to meet the preferences and unique needs of clients
- 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
- Implements peer-run, evidence based self-management interventions as determined by the agency

Harm Reduction, Syringe Access and Health Promotion:

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

- Promotes and provides referrals to a wide range of harm reduction and health promotion resources including those related to syringe exchange, safer injection practices, opioid overdose prevention, counseling about alcohol use, safer sex practices, condom availability, smoking cessation, educational information, social services, and others as needed by the client
- Provides information on risk of relapse and re-infection. Provides education and reinforces harm reduction messaging
- Researches, develops and maintains up-to-date information about community, health and other resources and services, both informal and formal
- Recognizes signs of harm, crisis or distress that may interfere with medical care or treatment adherence. Takes action to alert or engage other members of the care team to address the situation by using local resources, services or client support
- Provides information on opioid overdose prevention and opioid substitution and supporting others
- Works with a multi-disciplinary team to address difficulties a client may experience due to active substance use, such as appointment keeping and treatment adherence

Support Groups:

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

- Markets support group to recruit clients
- Serves as facilitator or co-facilitator of a support group, along with another staff person
- Acts as a liaison between peers and co-facilitator, to bridge gaps and ensure groups are meeting the needs of the participants
- Leads by example by strategically sharing personal experience/stories
- Encourages active participation and client sharing of information
- Establishes and enforces support group rules to ensure confidentiality and that the group is a “safe space”
- Meets needs of participants, offering information about additional supportive services or groups that may be beneficial
- Makes statements that show understanding, compassion, sympathy, and concern
- Encourages peer members to listen and provide supportive feedback

Supportive Services:

HCV peer workers can play an important role supporting the client in accessing a wide range of social services and supports. HCV peer workers should not be expected to complete needs assessments, develop service plans or make decisions about referrals to specific psycho-social services. Rather, peer workers work as part of the care team to gather information about client needs, support an established service plan and support the client in accessing services to which they have been referred. Based on the specific work setting and job description, HCV peer workers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the specific competencies outlined below:

- Works as part of a multi-disciplinary team to identify supportive services that meet the needs of the client. Acts as a liaison between the client and multi-disciplinary team
- Educates clients about the range of behavioral health services available and works to destigmatize use of these services
- Works as part of a multi-disciplinary team to provide targeted referrals and linkages to essential services outside of agency
- Assists clients with making appointments for supportive services or arranges appointments for them
- Accompanies clients to supportive services appointments

Case Conferencing:

HCV 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, HCV 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 the provision of service delivery and needed supportive services
- Provides a brief summary of their work with the client, including reporting on psychosocial issues, and 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

Facilitating client involvement in continuous quality improvement (QI) efforts:

Peer workers engage and encourage clients to play a role in facility-level QI activities, and participates in QI activities as part of their role as members of the care team. Based on the specific work setting and job description, HCV peer workers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the specific competencies outlined below:

- Engages and encourages clients to participate in facility-level QI activities
- Participates in QI activities as part of their role as members of the care team
- Represent the voices and perspectives of clients in the QI process
- Participates in agency efforts to reduce and eliminate stigma, prejudice and discrimination of people who have HCV and persons who use drugs
- Actively participates in efforts to improve the organization

Health Coverage:

Basic understanding of health insurance coverage and benefits, and how employment and other circumstances can affect one's eligibility. Based on the specific work setting and job description, HCV peer workers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the specific competencies outlined below:

- Explains that the New York's Health Exchange website (<https://nystateofhealth.ny.gov/>), is the place to visit to assess eligibility for health insurance coverage

- Understands and identifies local resources that can assist clients with enrollment in a range of health coverage options
- Reinforces the need to work with staff such as a health benefits specialist, case manager or social worker to ensure health coverage needs are met
- In conjunction with the multi-disciplinary team, provides information about the prior authorization process, requirements and documentation needed to obtain approval. Provides information about appeal process, if needed and links client to appropriate staff and services in the event of a denial
- Works as part of the multi-disciplinary team to ensure health coverage and medication access needs are met and informs clients about relevant patient assistance programs (for high co-pays and HCV medications)
- Advocates for client and facilitates referrals for additional assistance
- Understands how employment affects his or her own benefits and coverage

Documentation and Record-Keeping:

HCV peer workers are expected to provide documentation of the services they deliver to clients. Based on the specific work setting and job description, HCV 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
- Interprets data and patient information regarding the care of the patient, in consultation with care team as needed
- 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