

# **Core Competencies for HIV Peer Workers**

## **New York State Department of Health AIDS Institute**

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### **Background Regarding These Competencies**

The effectiveness of HIV 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, HIV. Peer workers provide a unique category of service delivery through the lens of “shared lived experience” which is distinct 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 defining the specific job description and recruiting HIV 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 HIV 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 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 burnout
- Demonstrates effective oral, written and non-verbal communication skills appropriate for the specific 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 his/her shared lived experience, despite the differences that may exist between them

### **Specialized Competencies:**

#### HIV Testing:

HIV peer workers may serve as part of a multi-disciplinary team delivering HIV testing services, including peer-delivered pre-test messages, conducting CLIA-waived rapid HIV tests and providing follow-up sessions with clients who test HIV positive, indeterminate or negative. Based on the specific work setting and job description, HIV 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 HIV testing following NYS HIV testing laws, including obtaining informed consent before the HIV test is conducted
- Explains key points of information about HIV testing
- Shares personal experiences in a strategic manner to demonstrate to the client the importance of knowing one's HIV status

#### For clients with a preliminary positive rapid HIV test result:

- Works as part of a multi-disciplinary team to explain the meaning of the test result and that additional testing is needed to know for sure
- Works as part of a multi-disciplinary team to arrange for blood draw for additional testing
- Offer accompaniment and support to access confirmatory testing in accordance with job responsibilities
- Makes a follow-up appointment to provide the client the final test result

#### For clients with a confirmed positive HIV test result:

- Works as part of a multi-disciplinary team to review all NYS required follow-up actions for clients with a confirmed positive HIV test result
- Works as part of a multi-disciplinary team to arrange and link client to an appointment for HIV care, following best practices outlined below
- Explains the importance of partner services and makes an effective referral to the appropriate partner services program
- When applicable, uses his or her personal experience with partner notification to assist the client in understanding the range of options for notifying an at-risk partner
- When applicable, uses his or her experience with engagement and linkage to care and HIV treatment options to help the client understand that he or she can live a healthy life with HIV

#### For clients with a negative or indeterminate test result:

- Explains that the window period is the length of time after infection but before an HIV test is able to detect the presence of infection
- Explains the need for follow-up testing
- Explains options for HIV/STD/hepatitis prevention including: abstinence, male and female condom use, PEP, PrEP, safer sex, safer injection practices and other harm reduction strategies

- Refer and link clients to a range of prevention services
- Uses a harm reduction approach to help the client choose options that are acceptable to the client which reduce his or her risk of HIV/STD/viral hepatitis infection
- Explains the location and functioning of syringe exchange program and ESAP to all clients who use drugs

#### Engagement, Linkage and Retention to Care:

HIV peer workers can play a very important role in engaging, linking and retaining people with confirmed HIV infection to care. HIV 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, HIV peer workers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the specific competencies outlined below:

- Uses his or her personal experience of HIV treatment to explain the importance of participating in HIV health care
- Conducts outreach to people at risk for or living with HIV/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 his or her first HIV 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 viral suppression and how achieving viral suppression will promote the client's health and reduce the chance of transmission to partners.
- Reaches out to engage clients across the whole continuum of the treatment process

#### Anti-retroviral Therapy (ART) Initiation and Treatment Adherence:

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

provider, listen to client concerns about treatment adherence and works 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. Based on the specific work setting and job description, HIV peer workers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the specific competencies outlined below:

- Uses his or her experience of HIV treatment options and adherence to motivate the client and demonstrate that a high level of adherence is achievable
- Explains that not taking ART medication regularly can result in: 1) poorer health, 2) the medications not working as well, 3) reduced options for future treatment, and 4) increased likelihood of transmitting the virus to partners
- Reinforces the client's understanding of HIV-related lab results, including the meaning of viral load and CD4 count
- 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) that may be affecting his or her ability to adhere to a treatment regimen

#### Patient Navigation:

HIV 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 his or her specific job description, HIV peers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the specific competencies outlined below:

- Provides a tour of the facility
- Provides educational and organizational materials
- Accompanies clients to community activities and appointments and participates in community activities with peers as assigned and approved by supervisor
- Informs new clients about available services and processes
- Engages providers from HIV treatment and other services to meet the needs of clients
- 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, HIV 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, viral suppression, and available support services
- Recognizes treatment adherence and viral suppression accomplishments
- 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 viral suppression, 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, HIV 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, 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, STD screening and treatment and others as needed by the client
- Distributes or refers clients to HIV/STD/viral hepatitis educational resources, evidence based prevention interventions and other prevention services/ resources
- 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 treatment adherence and takes action to alert or engage other members of the care team and address the situation by using knowledge of local resources, services or client support

#### Support Groups:

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

- Markets support group to recruit clients to join the group
- 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"
- Makes statements that show understanding, compassion, sympathy, and concern
- Encourages clients to listen and provide supportive feedback

### Supportive Services:

HIV peer workers can play an important role supporting the client in accessing a wide range of social services and supports. HIV 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 he or she has been referred. Based on the specific work setting and job description, HIV peer workers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the specific competencies outlined below:

- Works as part of multi-disciplinary team to identify supportive services that meets the needs of the clients
- Work as part of a team a multi-disciplinary team to provide targeted referrals and linkages to essential services outside of agency
- Educate clients about the range of behavioral health services and works to destigmatize these services
- Assists clients with making appointments for supportive services or arranges appointments for them
- Accompanies clients to supportive services appointments

### Case Conferencing:

HIV 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, HIV 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 for client
- 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

### Facilitating Client Involvement in Continuous Quality Improvement 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, HIV 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 prejudice, stigma and discrimination against people who have HIV
- Actively participates in efforts to improve the organization

### Health Coverage:

Understanding health insurance coverage and benefits, and how employment and other circumstances can effect one's eligibility can be difficult. Based on the specific work setting and job description, HIV 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
- Explains what ADAP is and provide information about how to contact ADAP
- Works as part of the team to inform clients about relevant patient assistance programs to ensure health coverage and medication access needs are met
- Understands how employment effects his or her own benefits and coverage

### Documentation and Record-Keeping:

HIV peer workers are expected to provide documentation of the services they deliver to clients. Based on the specific work setting and job description, HIV 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