

Core Competencies for Harm Reduction Peer Workers

New York State Department of Health AIDS Institute

Background Regarding These Competencies

The effectiveness of Harm Reduction (HR) Peer Workers is rooted in the fact that these workers share a common “lived experience” with participants. As a result, HR Peer Workers have a unique capacity to provide targeted services that can inspire, empower and support drug users and sex workers. 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 key competencies that a NYS AIDS Institute certified Harm Reduction Peer Worker might need to demonstrate, depending on their work setting. Organizations employing peers should consider the concept of “shared lived experience” and review this list of competencies when defining the specific job description, recruiting, hiring, and supervising HR Peer Workers. For HR peer workers, “shared lived experience” includes those individuals who have a shared life experience of drug use and/or engagement in high risk sexual behaviors/sex work. These experiences enable peers to empathize appropriately with target populations and effectively engage them into services. 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 Harm Reduction peer workers are responsible for demonstrating 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
- 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 diseases

Harm Reduction Competencies

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

- Effectively conveys the principles of harm reduction and how it applies to different areas of risk (i.e., drug use, sex work, health behavior change, etc.)
- Has a basic understanding of the various classes of drugs and how to employ harm reduction strategies that are drug-specific
- Has a basic understanding of sexual risk and associated harm reduction strategies
- 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, alcohol use, safer sex practices, condom availability, PrEP/PEP, smoking cessation, prevention information, social services, and others as needed by the participant
- 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 service delivery team to address the situation by using local resources, services or participant support
- Provides information on opioid overdose prevention and response, Opioid Agonist Therapies and other supportive services
- Is a Trained Responder in the Opioid Overdose Prevention Program
- Works with a multi-disciplinary team to address issues that impact participants' ability to engage in services due to drug use and/or high risk sexual behaviors/sex work (i.e. HIV/STD/HCV co-infection, stigma and other social inequalities, etc.)

Specialized Competencies

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

Promoting access to sterile injection equipment and supplies

Syringe Exchange Programs (SEPs)

- Has the ability to provide an overview of policies, procedures, and essential elements of SEP operations

- Has a clear understanding of the SEPs policies and procedures including different threshold criteria/legal requirements for enrolling individuals into SEP based on age (under 18 vs. over 18)
- Explains to drug users and others the general services available at an SEP and describes who is eligible for these services
- Exhibits a basic understanding of penal and public health laws & NYS regulations that allow for syringe access in NYS, and conducts peer delivered syringe exchange (PDSE) accordingly.
- Conducts outreach to active drug users in the community
- Works as part of the SEP team or individually conducts initial assessment/screening to determine an individual's needs and eligibility for services through the SEP
- Works as part of the SEP team or individually issues Participant Identification Cards and explains how to use the ID card in the event of an interaction with Law Enforcement
- Has the ability to engage and educate community members and communicate the services of their program and their duties as a peer
- Has the ability to respond to Law Enforcement questions, concerns and challenges

Expanded Syringe Access Program (ESAP)

- Explains how NYS ESAP works, including:
 - educating individuals on minimum age eligibility for ESAP
 - educating individuals about how to locate and identify a participating pharmacy
 - educating individuals about how to purchase syringes at participating pharmacies
 - educating individuals about how to obtain syringes from health care or other sites that may participate in ESAP
 - educating individuals how to use ESAP voucher programs
 - educating individuals about how to address issues with Law Enforcement or problems with a pharmacy

Safer injecting practices

- Remains informed and aware of current trends in drug use as they related to the needs of participants in their program
- Educates participants on safer injecting practices including, but not limited to:
 - The importance of using new sterile injection equipment and works and the health risks of reusing dull or overused syringes
 - How to select an injection site, taking into consideration vein health and previous injections
 - The importance of cleaning the injection site
 - The importance of injecting on a clean surface, free of exposure to blood, other toxins or germs

- The importance of avoiding sharing needles or works including cotton, water, etc.
- How to avoid exposure to another person’s blood products during the injection process
- How to clean works as a last resort.
- How to avoid or address some of health risks of injecting including abscesses, endocarditis, MRSA, etc.
- Strategies for alternatives to injecting and/or frequency of injecting
- Alternative types of injecting, including intramuscular (IM) and skin-popping

Promoting safe syringe disposal

- Explains the importance of safe disposal of used syringes
- Describes ways to dispose of syringes safely, including:
 - Returning used syringes to a syringe exchange program or other site (i.e. hospitals, nursing homes, residential sharps program)
 - Informing participants of any disposal kiosks available in the community
 - Educate participants about disposing of syringes in hard plastic bottles, for example bleach or detergent bottles
 - Provides alternative strategies for safer disposal in the absence of the above options

Safe Handling of syringes

- Handles new and used syringes in a safe manner in accordance with agency policies and procedures
- Follows agency policy and procedure in the case of an accidental needle stick
- Educates participants about how to safely handle syringes to avoid accidental needle sticks for themselves and others in the environment

Preventing Opioid Overdose

- Describes the symptoms of an opioid overdose
- Educates participants about how to avoid overdose, sharing information including, but not limited to, the following:
 - Changes in purity/potency of drugs being used
 - Changes in individual tolerance, including after periods of abstinence
 - Risks of using alone
 - Dangers of mixing drugs
 - Reports of increased toxicity or tainted drugs in the local community
- Explains that there is a medication that can reverse an opioid overdose
- Refers participants to Opioid Overdose Prevention Programs for training and/or provides this training when appropriate.

- Explains the importance of calling 911 in cases of a suspected overdose
- Explains that the Good Samaritan Law provides protection from charges and prosecution for certain drug related charges, for the person who calls and the person who ODs

Making Service Referrals

- Follows agency policies for referring participants to a wide range of needed services including, but not limited to:
 - HIV/HCV/STD testing, care and treatment
 - Detox, in-patient rehab, out-patient rehab, Opioid Agonist Therapy (Buprenorphine, methadone)
 - Supportive services such as harm reduction counseling, evidence based interventions, support groups, AA/NA, mental health counseling, etc.
 - Social services including housing, shelters, domestic violence services, food pantry, free meals, clothing, entitlements and other services as needed
- Follows-up with participants regarding their referral experiences and outcomes, including addressing situations where an appointment was not kept
- Provides escort for participants for referrals when appropriate or needed
- Understands and identifies local resources that can assist participants with enrollment in a range of health coverage options

Participant Self-Management

- Relates their own and/or others' life experiences (while respecting privacy) to participants to inspire hope and empowerment
- Models positive self-management behaviors
- 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
- Recognizes and responds to the complexities and uniqueness of each participant and tailors services and support to meet the preferences and unique needs of participants
- Works as part of the service delivery team to help the participant develop self-management goals, provide coaching and track progress meeting these goals
- Educates participants about health, wellness, and available support services
- Validates participant's life experiences and feelings and celebrates participant's efforts and accomplishments
- Assists participants in voicing concerns and questions to members of the service delivery team.

Facilitating involvement in continuous quality improvement (QI) efforts:

HR Peer workers engage and encourage participants to play a role in facility-level QI activities, and participate in QI activities as part of their role as members of the service delivery team.

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

- Actively participates in efforts to improve the organization
- Engages and encourages participants to contribute to facility-level QI activities
- Participates in QI activities as part of their role as members of the service delivery team
- Represent the voices and perspectives of participants in the QI process
- Participates in agency efforts to provide services in ways that reduce stigma, prejudice and discrimination of persons who use drugs and/or engage in high risk sexual behaviors/sex work

Documentation and Record-Keeping:

HR peer workers are expected to provide documentation of the services they deliver to participants. Based on the specific work setting and job description, HR peer workers may be responsible for carrying out some or all of the specific competencies outlined below:

- Respects confidentiality of participant records and follows all agency policies for handling participant records
- Documents services provided to the participant in the participant record, in accordance with agency policies, including documenting referrals and follow-up activities
- Documents time and effort as needed for billing/ reimbursement practices, in accordance with agency policies