



HARLEM HOSPITAL PEERS AT THE CENTER OF A MULTIDISCIPLINARY HIV CARE TEAM

Harlem Hospital's Infectious Diseases Division is a pioneer in the use of peers—specifically trained members of the community who are living with HIV/AIDS—to support others who are learning to cope with the daily challenges of the disease. In 1998 the Division launched a randomized controlled trial of an innovative, peer-based intervention to help clients stay in care and improve their adherence to antiretroviral (ART) treatment regimens. The program combined one-on-one peer support with adherence-specific health education, case management, and support groups.

About the Harlem Hospital peer program today

The trial's successful implementation led to the continuation of the Harlem program. Today four peers, with a caseload of 10-15 clients each, form an integral part of the network of care, focusing on underserved populations targeted by the Ryan White CARE Act. These peers establish a one-on-one relationship with their clients and collaborate closely with health care professionals to improve the quality of health care that clients receive.

“The most important thing you do as a peer is to connect with the client and build trust,” explains Jackie Howell, who has worked as a peer in Harlem Hospital for seven years. “Unless you build trust, the client is not going to speak to you or believe what you say.”

Depending on clients’ needs, a peer may brainstorm ideas for adapting a treatment regimen to the client’s daily schedule, provide emotional support and a listening ear, navigate the health care network, work with case managers to refer clients to needed services, accompany them to appointments, or help them to learn more about the HIV virus. They may also co-facilitate support groups or participate in bimonthly meetings of the Harlem Hospital Community Advisory Board.

A team approach to HIV care

Through biweekly case management meetings, a multidisciplinary team of peers, social workers, case managers, program managers, doctors and other care providers reviews the entire spectrum of client care to identify areas for improvement. By working as a liaison between care providers and clients, peers often help clients to understand and accept their doctors’ medical advice, overcome mistrust of the medical system, and offer providers additional insights into a client’s situation.

Finding and training the “natural helper”

Filling the role of peer in an HIV care network requires careful recruitment, says Julie Franks, PhD, who served as evaluator for the study. “In addition to being familiar with the community and adherent to ART, we look for a ‘natural helper’, someone with a non-judgmental attitude towards people’s lifestyle and preferences, and an ability to listen,” according to Franks. “They have to be able to use their experience and their listening skills and empathy to say, ‘You know, I went through the same thing.’”

Potential peers attend a rigorous training program which runs for several weeks, with half- or full-day sessions that total about 50 hours. The intensive curricula combine adult learning theory, best practices from Harlem Hospital and other peer programs, and the needs of the local community. Topics range from the basics of HIV care and treatment and communications skills to specific challenges like substance use and mental health concerns. The highly interactive training includes experienced peers who share their knowledge with participants. Members of the original training team collaborated in the foundation of PACT (Peer Advanced Competency Training program), a national education and capacity-building center for peer programs. Since 2006 PACT has provided training, based on the Harlem Hospital model, for HIV peers throughout the New York City area.



“One of the things we do as peers is to get connected with the doctors. The doctors at Harlem Hospital are very respectful of the peers, and that helped our program improve.”

Jackie Howell
Peer educator, Harlem Hospital Infectious Diseases Division

Challenges of the peer role

The nontraditional nature of the peer role presents unique challenges. “This is not a typical professional relationship,” explains Paul Colson, PhD, PACT Program Director. “We’re asking people to reach out in a personal way to help somebody. We give guidance around the health-promoting behaviors we want peers to help clients develop: things like building a good relationship with providers, creating a social support network, identifying personal barriers to keeping appointments or adhering to medication, and focusing on self-care.”

Because HIV-positive peers share many of the same challenges as the clients they serve, the peer supervisory role is crucial to the program’s success. The program supervisor meets with each peer weekly to review activities, discuss peer-client interactions and assess client response, and address any stresses affecting the peer.

Rewards of a successful peer program

Serving as a role model to others can help peers strengthen their own resolve to adhere to treatment regimens. Many peers derive deep personal satisfaction from helping others through a difficult time, and the support, skills, and self-confidence that they develop contribute to improved self-esteem.

Through the encouragement of their peer partners, the number of clients staying in care and taking their medications has improved. “Imagine a client who didn’t want to know anything about HIV, about getting off drugs, about taking care of themselves, and in the end wanting to do all these things,” observes Howell. “That’s the success we achieved in the peer program.”

HARLEM HOSPITAL PEER ADHERENCE SUPPORT PROGRAM

Peer program founded: 1998

Program mission: Improve treatment adherence for people living with HIV/AIDS

Number of peer educators: 4-6
A total of 15 peers have worked in the program from 1998 to date.

Number of clients peers have served:
About 300 clients over the past 9 years

Work schedule: Part time, up to 15 hours/week

Funding source: NY State Department of Health AIDS Institute, National Institute on Drug Abuse, Health Resources and Services Administration HIV/AIDS Bureau Special Projects of National Significance

Compensation: Peers are paid an hourly rate

Peer responsibilities:

- Provide one-on-one social and emotional support to clients
- Help clients navigate the hospital, access needed services
- Coach clients in adherence skills
- Provide feedback to adherence program staff
- Attend/co-facilitate support groups
- Facilitate communication with providers
- Participate in case management, individual supervision sessions

Success measures: Adherence to care and treatment



PACT (www.PeerNYC.org) is one of three national education and capacity-building centers for peer programs which work with the PEER Center (Peer Education & Evaluation Resource Center), a national resource for organizations interested in implementing peer programs. For more information, visit the website at <http://www.hdwg.org/peercenter/>.

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Boston University School of Public Health