5. RECRUITING, HIRING, AND ORIENTING PEERS

LaTrischa Miles (left) with Peer Educator Training Site Manager Alicia Downes.

> Some of the skills that I look for in hiring a peer are good listening skills and being resourceful. Some knowledge can be taught, but some of those innate qualities that you have to have cannot be taught: compassion, being non-judgmental, being able to connect with others, and being positive and respectful of others as far as cultural diversity.

LaTrischa Miles
Peer Supervisor
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A. Recruitment

Qualifications

Unlike positions with strict educational requirements, peer roles usually draw on unconventional assets. These include experience living in the client population, experience dealing with one or more difficulties faced by the client population (such as unstable housing, substance abuse, domestic violence), fluency in a specified language, ability to relate easily to clients and program staff alike, non-judgmental acceptance of alternative perspectives and lifestyles, good communication skills, willingness to voice opinions and share information with others, and the ability to work independently.

However, these "unconventional assets" are unlikely to be documented with diplomas, degrees, or certificates. In fact, many excellent peers cannot present a resume or application which meets minimal requirements at many Human Resources (HR) departments. In such cases, the directors or managers of the peer programs may have to explain to HR staff why peer positions require a different skill set. It also suggests that the recruitment process may involve different approaches from those traditionally used for program staff, as discussed below.

HIV care teams that include peers should define peer job skills explicitly and operationalize them so that peers and supervisors have objective criteria for assessing peers' initial qualifications and their on-the-job development.

Below are some recommendations for qualifications for peers engaged in HIV services. These qualifications can be adapted to program- and agency-specific needs:

- Direct experience with HIV treatment (either as a patient or a care giver)
- Local resident or familiarity with the community
- Ability to work with professionals as part of an HIV care team
- Ability to reflect on and apply life experience
- Good communication skills
- Open-minded (non-judgmental)
- Committed to working with others to improve HIV care
- Not currently using street drugs or abusing alcohol

RECRUITING, HIRING, AND ORIENTING PEERS

Programs will find it helpful to define objectives for peers in advance of constructing a program-specific peer job description. Taken together, these objectives comprise a peer role that both furthers program goals and maximizes the unique contribution of peers to the program. The Program Resources for Section 4, Peer Roles and Responsibilities, include sample job descriptions for peers that can be adapted to meet program-specific needs.

The Recruitment Process

Because peers often don't have conventional resumes (as discussed above), the traditional HR hiring practices may need to be amended slightly. One useful step is for peer program managers or supervisors to take a proactive stance in encouraging applications among appropriate candidates. This may be done through several means:

• Soliciting names of possible candidates from clinic providers, peers, and other staff
• Emails, postings on websites, e-blasts on listservs
• Sending flyers or other materials to clinics, community-based organizations, AIDS service organizations, planning councils, etc.

After gathering these nominations, one may want to conduct brief interviews in person or over the telephone with interested candidates. It is preferable that these interviews involve both the peer program supervisor and a current peer. A program may also want to involve other non-peer staff such as case managers in interviews if the peer candidate will be working with other staff. This may happen before, after, or simultaneously with traditional HR practices such as posting positions.

Sample questions for this interview include:

• How did you hear about the peer program?
• Why are you interested in being a peer?
• What do you expect to get out of working for this program, personally?
• Tell us about any HIV/AIDS training programs that you've been involved in.
• Tell us about your work or volunteer experience in the field of HIV/AIDS.
• Are you aware that we will not tolerate the use of street drugs during your employment with the peer program? Do you have any concerns about this issue?
• Are you comfortable sharing your HIV status with co-workers, supervisors, and clients while working for this program? If you were asked, "Are you HIV positive?" what would your response be?
• How would you go about telling someone close to you that you have HIV/AIDS?
• How would you go about telling a client that you too have HIV/AIDS?
• What would you tell a client about your sexual or drug-using history?
• How comfortable are you when discussing issues around sex and drug use? How would you rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being very uncomfortable and 10 being very comfortable?

The Program Resources for Section 5, Recruiting, Hiring and Orienting Peers, provide more sample interview scenarios and screening questions.

Some agencies may have a standard protocol through their Human Resources department for recruiting and interviewing candidates. It is important to gather that information for the interview process and be aware of some of the challenges the process may cause for peer candidates. For example, the standard HR hiring process may itself pose a number of challenges for peer applicants:

- If online applications are required, peers may be unfamiliar with such programs or may not have access to computers.
- Some applicants may have criminal histories or may not be able to pass drug screening.
- Due to limited work histories, some applicants may not be able to provide two professional references.
- Some applicants may not be accustomed to a formal interview process.

Keeping these points in mind and being prepared to communicate the process and policy clearly to the candidate can help reduce challenges to getting a peer hired.

Disclosing HIV Status

One characteristic that distinguishes the hiring of peers from that of other employees is the issue of disclosing one's HIV status. Many peers come from situations, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, where anonymity is valued. Additionally, the stigma attached to HIV/AIDS makes most people cautious about revealing that information indiscriminately.

The tradition of peer work in HIV/AIDS, however, is built upon the concept that those who are "infected or affected" will use their personal experience to assist clients. This goes beyond the normal expectation of empathy in the helping professions; HIV/AIDS peers can draw upon their own experiences in being diagnosed, having to deal with disclosure to family and friends, taking medication, experiencing side effects, etc. to aid clients. Many peer program supervisors believe that a peer who insists on anonymity is not fulfilling the peer role.

While an HIV-positive peer may not be allowed to keep his or her status secret, special steps should be taken regarding disclosure. By publicly defining

peers as someone with HIV, some early programs may have unwittingly revealed their peers' status, leading to stigmatization. Job announcements which set HIV status as a job requirement may discourage many potential candidates.

A better approach to the issue of requiring candidates to be infected or affected, while not unduly compromising their health information, may include some or all of the following suggestions:

- Job announcements could require "firsthand knowledge in HIV/AIDS issues."
- Announcements could be distributed to groups or places where many individuals who see it are likely to be HIV-positive.
- In interviews, candidates could be asked how they envision using their "firsthand knowledge" instead of having to explicitly confirm their status.
- In interviews and other communications, peer programs could stress the importance of peers having shared characteristics with the target population.

B. Hiring

Special Considerations

Salaries, stipends, or other monetary compensation paid to HIV-positive peers might, in some cases, affect or risk their benefits/entitlements. Any decrease or loss of benefits can present a substantial disincentive to doing peer work. During the hiring process, supervisors or program directors have a responsibility to raise peers' awareness of this risk, and provide information and referrals to legal or other services where they can receive training or individualized guidance regarding their benefits. In most cases, supervisors do not have the background or resources available to analyze the case of

each peer, but they can encourage peers to consult with a lawyer or a benefits specialist concerning the limits of how much they can earn without jeopardizing existing benefits. See Read More: Benefits Questions to Discuss with Peers for more information.

Another special consideration in hiring peers is the practice of running background checks on applicants, particularly with respect to criminal history. The peer program supervisor should be aware of what is required by the organization and consider asking for a waiver of this requirement if it seems likely to eliminate many otherwise worthy candidates. In such cases, the supervisor may need to present evidence that program activities are geared toward reaching those with drug-using or criminal histories.

C. Orientation and Training

Peers may come to their position with an advanced degree or without a high school diploma. They may have extensive training in health care provision or none at all. In any case, most programs will find it necessary to provide some job-specific training to new peers. An organizational environment that supports learning is the best way to ensure that peers are adequately prepared to do their job. Furthermore, policies that encourage education and training strengthen motivation and expose peers to possibilities that they may not have envisioned before taking on a peer position. Creating a supportive learning environment may take time, especially for supervisors working within institutions that do not promote ongoing development in non-traditional fields.

Orientation and training for peer workers generally entails the following components:

- Standard "new employee" orientation for the organization
- Specific role-based training with peer supervisor or with external training program
- "Shadowing" current peers as they work
- Special attention to issues of confidentiality (See Read More: Confidentiality and Peers.)

Training of Peers

Depending on the peers' responsibilities, it is recommended that peers complete a comprehensive training course on HIV (knowledge about transmission, the virus life cycle, and treatments), communication skills and their role as a peer. A sample of training sections can be found at Building Blocks to Peer Success (http://peer.hdwg.org/training_toolkit), a train-the-trainer toolkit. If the agency staff is not prepared to conduct trainings, there are many agencies that provide peer training. For further opportunities for training that may be suitable for peers and consumers, consult the Target Center website (http://www.careacttarget.org/), which provides technical assistance for the Ryan White community.

Training Non-Peer Staff

It is critical to the success and sustainability of peer programs that all employees within organizations understand the unique roles, philosophy and goals of peer programs. This understanding will also provide a workplace culture that is more likely to value peer work and leadership within the organization. Inclusion of peer work, whether it is paid or volunteer, in new employee orientation demonstrates that the organization values peer work. It also helps to set the stage for new employees to view peers as their colleagues and co-workers. (See Read More: Orienting Non-Peer Employees on Peer Support.)

Continuing Training

As peers become a more central component of health and social service interventions, programs can expect to see increased regulation of their role, particularly with respect to training requirements and certification. In such cases, emergent concerns with quality assurance may change the way organizations perceive peers, paving the way for program managers to develop more progressive continuing education policies.

An open-door policy for specific training requests will encourage peers to inform their supervisors of perceived gaps in their knowledge and skills. If program managers communicate with peers regularly about job requirements, they will have a concrete understanding of peers' capacities and training gaps and therefore can prioritize individual peer and collective training needs.

On-the-job follow up to training can reinforce training sessions and help tailor new skills and knowledge to the workplace. Peers can bring new information back to their colleagues in brief presentations to stimulate discussion, and supervisors can reinforce new information with handouts or references to sources of further information. Some programs encourage training "graduates" to train other peers and/or program staff when they return to work.

The Program Resources for Section 5 (Recruiting, Hiring, and Orienting Peers) contain sample orientation packets for peers.

D. Retention of Peers

One way to justify investments in recruiting and training peers is to make sure they remain productive team members. Attending to peer needs by providing an appropriate work context, training, and skills development, in addition to opportunities to give feedback, recognition and appreciation, and tangible benefits is important to keep peers motivated and able to perform their job. The following elements have been shown to contribute to optimal peer performance as well as high retention rates.

RECRUITING, HIRING, AND ORIENTING PEERS

Staff from Christie's Place participate in the San Diego HIV Health Services Planning Council.

If peers are given the opportunity to share their work with external networks, they receive acknowledgment for their contribution.

Monetary Compensation

Many programs have funding to employ peers in full- or part-time positions. Others may provide stipends for peers or offer other benefits. While stipends are not salaries, they are an excellent way to reward and compensate peers for their time and hard work.

Transportation reimbursement is also a good way to help peers fulfill their role. In addition to work transportation, an effort should be made to provide transportation to any work-related events such as training, meetings, client appointments, or outreach activities. As mentioned above in Hiring, there may be some dangers inherent in providing different forms of monetary compensation to peers, as receipt of such compensation may affect benefits they receive.

Non-Monetary Benefits

Programs that actively seek meetings and conferences of interest to peers enable peers to expand their

horizons by interacting with and learning from a community of professional and lay service providers. Program-sponsored training courses designed to upgrade peer knowledge about HIV and adherence and to improve social support skills demonstrate a program's commitment to the peer and will engender peer motivation and program loyalty. For example, workshops might be organized to address peer wellness issues, including stress management, dramatic expression and valuing diversity. Supervisors need to recognize that taking the time to consider peer preferences will improve their job performance and satisfaction.

Supervision

Supervision is covered in detail in Section 6: Supervising Peers of this toolkit. However, it is important to note that good supervision is a key component in retaining peer workers. The role of the peer worker has many challenges, with peer workers living on the "front lines" of the difficulties associated with HIV/AIDS. To the extent that these challenges are addressed through clear job descriptions, acknowledgment and acceptance among other workers in the organization, and supportive and sympathetic supervision, peers will be more likely to contribute fully and feel good about their work.

Advocacy, Activist, and Service Provider Networks

Peers assist and encourage each other in much the same way they assist clients. Peers tend to see themselves as members of a small team within the overall program. Having trained together, discussed difficult clients, and shared personal issues affecting their job, peers build bonds that surpass those normally formed in the workplace. Programs can enhance this natural source of support by setting aside time and space for peers

MAKING THE MOST OF EXTERNAL TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

- Acquire information on content, location and space availability
- Submit peer registration form, await confirmation, keep peers updated on registration process
- Keep registration records for follow-up purposes
- Provide peers with training details as they become available
- Adapt program operations to accommodate peer absence
- Establish training expectations with peer: attendance, how the peer is expected to use information and skills acquired, responsibility for training others, reporting, if applicable
- Create a feedback loop for follow up and future reference with training facilitator
- Make appropriate logistical arrangements: provide peer with transportation and food
- Maintain contact with peer during the training
- Review and adjust peer activities based on information and skills acquired during training

to conduct their own support groups. An open, friendly work environment with designated space for peers encourages discussion and collaboration. By aiming to build internal peer support, a program ensures greater personal resources for peers to face work and personal challenges. Further, if peers are given the opportunity to share their work with external networks (at conferences, meetings, and other public forums), they receive acknowledgment for their contribution.

Effective Feedback Loops

One of the most important reasons to engage peers is to better serve a hard-to-reach population. Peers are uniquely placed to provide direct services to clients and carry back information about the client population to the program. Program evaluation must always include a plan to elicit peer feedback, whether it be through focus groups, individual interviews, or systematic discussion in individual

supervision. In this way, a program can devise more effective strategies to meet client needs, based on peers' first-hand experiences and insights. Peer feedback should inform all aspects of a program and may serve as the basis for fundamental changes in operations. Peers make valuable contributions to research meetings, social service coordination meetings, interdepartmental meetings, and strategic planning sessions. Peers can also play an important program development role in selecting new peers, facilitating workshops, and presenting the program at conferences and special events.

External Training Opportunities and Professional Development

External training resources can provide peers with valuable opportunities to develop skills and extend their service-related networks. However supervisors or program managers should select and monitor these resources carefully to ensure a beneficial experience for the peer.

RECRUITING, HIRING, AND ORIENTING PEERS

Read More for Section 5

- Cultural sensitivity and peer orientation
- Confidentiality and peers
- Orienting non-peer employees on peer support, philosophy and program models
- Benefits questions to discuss with peers

Resources for Section 5

(available at http://peer.hdwg.org/program-dev/resources)

- **Recruitment and Hiring**
  - o Hiring checklist (JRI)
  - o Sample interview questions (JRI)
  - o Interviewing peers: sample questions and possible responses (The Lotus Project)
  - o "Do and don't" interview questions (JRI)
  - o Peer selection process: what staff and potential peers should consider (Project ARK)
  - o Guide to writing job descriptions (JRI)
  - o Creating a recruitment plan (JRI)
  - o Applicant assessment template (JRI)
  - o Avoid common interview mistakes (JRI)
  - o Peer interview scenarios (Kansas City Free Health Clinic)
  - o Sample peer screening questions (The Lotus Project)

- **Orientation**
  - o Orientation checklist (JRI)
  - o Sample orientation training plan (JRI)
  - o Sample peer orientation agenda and resource packet (Kansas City Free Health Clinic)
  - o Sample peer-client confidentiality agreement (The Lotus Project)

- **Cultural Competency**
  - o Awareness spectrum (JRI)
  - o Cultural competence model (JRI)
  - o Cross model of cultural competency - information
  - o Cross model of cultural competency - handout (JRI)

This section is part of the online toolkit *Building Blocks to Peer Program Success*. For more information, visit http://peer.hdwg.org/program_dev