

5. RECRUITING, HIRING, AND ORIENTING PEERS

READ MORE: CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

Cultural Sensitivity and Peer Orientation

Recent immigrants account for an increasingly large proportion of persons with HIV in the United States. Degrees of acculturation, culturally specific beliefs related to health and illness, and perceptions of the U.S. medical and public health care systems all impact the success of health promotion and prevention interventions. Therefore, health care providers should interact with patients in culturally appropriate ways that maximize the effectiveness of the adherence support they offer. (Note: Profound cultural differences may also exist among persons born in the United States, not just among those coming from other countries.)

Cultural awareness or inclusiveness refers to the body of knowledge and interpersonal skills that allow providers to understand and collaborate with staff and patients from diverse cultures. Beyond self-awareness, cultural sensitivity requires awareness and acceptance of cultural differences, familiarity with the relevant patient cultures, and adaptation of appropriate skills.

The first step towards cultural sensitivity is for supervisors and others involved in peer programs to increase their awareness of how their own cultural backgrounds influence their approach to others, whether they are peers or patients. The Cultural Competency resource under Section 5 in the [Program Resources](#) can help organizations and individuals assess their cultural sensitivity.

The second step towards cultural sensitivity is increasing one's familiarity with the populations being served. At a basic level, this includes determining the primary languages spoken and which cultural groups predominate in the community. If resources for interpreters or translators fluent in relevant languages are insufficient, HIV programs may reach out to community-based organizations serving immigrant populations, which may be a source of qualified interpreters/translators at low or no cost.

Next, one should become familiar with the values and beliefs that prevail in the populations being served. Peer supervisors and others should not assume that a given peer or patient will exhibit all characteristics of his/her culture of origin, but should use their familiarity with the culture of origin to facilitate and deepen communication with the peer. This will create a foundation from which patient perceptions about health, illness, and health care systems, especially in relationship to HIV, can be explored.

A culturally sensitive approach to care can help build trust and credibility. This is especially important among populations in which HIV is stigmatized and who are unfamiliar with the U.S. medical and public health systems. Focus group discussions with community members and leaders, international medical graduates (IMGs), and former and current patients can provide insight into the beliefs and practices of a particular population, as can online resources. Collaborations with community-based organizations (CBOs) can also yield information and insight, and bring HIV treatment programs into community networks.

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▶ CULTURAL SENSITIVITY RESOURCES

Resources on cultural sensitivity are widely available, including manuals, training materials, and courses. Local health departments and medical associations may also offer workshops for health care providers, some of which are free of charge and/or offer continuing education units. Some resources for developing cultural sensitivity are listed on HRSA's website:

<http://www.hrsa.gov/culturalcompetence/>

Staff members should be educated about relevant cultural beliefs and practices of the communities they serve and should practice techniques for good communication with patients. This knowledge is crucial, as misinterpretation of certain behaviors or intentions can adversely affect the peer-supervisor or patient-provider relationships.

Employing individuals from the community with a diversity of backgrounds also helps to create a culturally sensitive environment. However, incorporating small changes, such as ensuring that patient forms and educational materials are available in multiple languages, can have a big impact on the comfort level of foreign-born patients.

In Summary: Basic Steps Toward Cultural Sensitivity

- Use translators, preferably the same gender as the patient or parent/caregiver.
- Ensure that educational materials are available in multiple languages.
- Provide medical history and consent forms in multiple languages.
- Work with CBOs and community leaders to build partnerships to establish trust and credibility with community members.
- Involve community members as volunteers and/or employees for the program.
- Collaborate with volunteers and patients to identify common misconceptions about HIV and address these issues with patients and parents/caregivers.

This “Read More” section accompanies [Section 5: Recruiting, Hiring and Orienting Peers](#), part of the online toolkit *Building Blocks to Peer Program Success*. For more information, visit http://peer.hdwg.org/program_dev