

5. RECRUITING, HIRING, AND ORIENTING PEERS

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Confidentiality and Peers

Protection of private health information is a legal concept that is incorporated into agency culture, policies and procedures and that agencies have a duty to insure that all employees and volunteers practice. It is a concept that all professionals working in health care learn early in their training and integrate into all aspects of their practice. The history of stigma and discrimination in the HIV/AIDS epidemic make maintaining strict confidentiality on behalf of clients a critical issue. Maintaining confidentiality and protecting the privacy of health information is a responsibility of peers just as it is a responsibility of all health care workers. Peers, especially those with no experience working in a health care setting, may not be as familiar with these concepts, and the practices needed to implement these concepts, as their co-workers and colleagues. In addition, the unique nature of peer work, that is, that the

peer is from the community he or she serves, may place the peer in difficult and confusing situations related to confidentiality.

Health care professionals have education, training and experience to deal with these situations. Peers usually have not. It is beneficial that all employees receive ongoing training on confidentiality; it is a complex issue that can challenge the most seasoned professional. Without orientation, training and ongoing supervision, peers may react to these situations from their personal point of view rather than from their role as a peer worker. It is imperative that peer programs recognize this and develop activities to provide peers with the tools they need to protect privacy and confidentiality.

A thorough review of the agency's policies and procedures regarding confidentiality and privacy is usually included in any employee orientation. Following this agency review, a review by the peer supervisor with the peer may be helpful. The focus of this review should include application of the agency's policies and procedures to the peer role. Most importantly, this review should include the unique aspects of the peer role and special circumstances, like the examples in the box to the left, which the peer may encounter. Role playing these situations may be most helpful for the peer. Encouraging peers to discuss confidentiality and actions peers will take to protect their clients' confidentiality may alleviate some awkwardness if situations like the examples occur. It is helpful for the new peer to hear from experienced peers about strategies and situations that they have needed to navigate regarding confidentiality.

▶ **EXAMPLES OF DIFFICULT SITUATIONS** related to confidentiality which peers might encounter:

- The peer is at a social gathering and overhears someone say, "I hear John (client of the peer) has AIDS"
- The peer is making appointment reminder phone calls for his clinic and recognizes a name on the patient list as a member of his church.
- A peer is meeting a friend for dinner and sitting at the table next to him is patient at the HIV clinic where the peer works.

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Additional training regarding the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), health information privacy and confidentiality may be helpful. (For more about HIPAA, see [Section 7.6: Evaluating Peer Programs: Protection of Human Subjects and Evaluation](#)). It is important for all of us, not just peers, not to get bogged down in legal terms, but an understanding of the legal foundation of confidentiality and privacy may be beneficial. Giving peers a brief historical context around confidentiality and HIV/AIDS will help them understand why there is a significant emphasis on this issue.

Training regarding the agency's policies, procedures and forms that protect health information is necessary. Assisting peers

in understanding these documents and discussion regarding implementing them can empower peers to better protect their clients' confidentiality. Confidentiality and protection of privacy must be a part of peer orientation, training and ongoing supervision.

Finally, supervision, whether administrative, supportive or clinical, is an excellent opportunity to discuss situations, role play responses, review policies and procedures, complete forms and otherwise work with peers to assure their protection of private health information.

The [Peer Role section](#) (Workplace Issues) of [Building Blocks to Peer Success](#), a toolkit for training HIV-positive peers, provides several training modules which address issues of confidentiality. The [Program Resources](#) section for Chapter 5 (Recruiting, Hiring, and Orienting Peers) contains a [sample confidentiality agreement](#) created by the Lotus Project.

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