

4. PEER ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

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PEERS AND SUPPORT GROUPS

Some peer programs utilize peers as facilitators or co-facilitators of support groups. Having a peer in a leadership role in a support group sends a powerful message to both the peer and the group participants regarding the value of peers to the organization, to the peer program and to the program participants. It also demonstrates a clear understanding that the life experience of peers and their deep understanding of group member struggles, will have a positive impact on the overall outcomes of the group.

Group facilitation requires skills that not all peers may have. Just like any staff member under consideration for a new role, it is important to assess the inherent skills and abilities of the peer. A peer who by nature is shy may not be comfortable speaking in a group or attempting to re-direct the focus of the group. At the opposite end of the spectrum, a peer who is gregarious and out-going may not be able to engage quieter members of the group in the process. Some peers are more open to new experiences and learning new skills than others. There is no hard and fast rule regarding whether peers can or should facilitate or co-facilitate a group. There are, however, some suggested factors to consider when planning to use peers as group facilitators or co-facilitators.

Group purpose

Groups can provide a range of services from social support or education to therapy groups, with a myriad of options within this continuum. It is important that the purpose of the group be consistent with the knowledge, skills and training of the peer. Without training and licensure, a peer would not be able to facilitate a therapy group,

but could, in appropriate circumstances, assist a trained therapist with facilitation. At times, this model can be the best of both worlds: a trained clinician and a peer with kindred life experience working together to provide leadership. A peer with training in group facilitation skills and knowledge of HIV disease and treatment could facilitate or co-facilitate an educational group focusing on an aspect of self management. Similarly, a peer with a demeanor that is well suited to facilitation, given appropriate clinical support from management and training in facilitation skills, could facilitate a support group where women or men living with HIV come together socially and discuss life challenges and triumphs.

Peer Training

Assessing the peer's strengths and skills is the first step in determining additional training needs of the peer. There are many options to providing the needed training. (The Building Blocks to Peer Success toolkit guide for people who conduct peer training includes a facilitation section which may be useful to peers learning to facilitate support groups.) Assessing your organization's ability to provide that training, either on site through existing staff resources, or off site through educational programs is the next step. An important aspect of developing the peer's group facilitation skills is providing on going feedback, support and guidance. It is often most helpful to have the peer function in the beginning as a "group helper" (logistics, set up, note taking) to observe the group process with a trained facilitator. Feedback and discussion with that facilitator immediately after the group

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provides some of the best “real-world” training for the peer. As the peer observes and learns the trained facilitator can increase the peer’s role in the group to include actual facilitation responsibilities. Again, immediate feedback and discussion regarding the successes and challenges experienced during the group is most helpful.

Facilitator or Co-Facilitator?

The decision about whether a peer should facilitate a group alone or be a co-facilitator depends on several factors. The first and foremost is the peer’s group facilitation skills and abilities. The peer’s interest in either role must be taken into account as well. Finally, the organization’s ability to supervise the peer and provide ongoing support and guidance must be considered. If the organization has a clinical manager or consultant available, this is an important area in which they can assist peers. Providing regular check-ins with the peer facilitator will be important in helping them understand group dynamics, individual issues and facilitation strategies.



Peers facilitating a support group.

The [Program Resources](http://peer.hdwg.org/program_dev/resources) (available at http://peer.hdwg.org/program_dev/resources) contains three helpful tools for peers who facilitate support groups:

- [15 steps to starting an HIV support group \(The Lotus Project\)](#)
- [Peer guide to HIV education and support groups \(Kansas City Free Health Clinic\)](#)
- [HCSP support group manual](#)

This “Read More” section accompanies [Section 4, Peer Roles and Responsibilities](#), part of the online toolkit *Building Blocks to Peer Program Success*. For more information, visit http://peer.hdwg.org/program_dev