



# CLOSING THE GAP

THE ROLE OF PEERS  
IN HIV CARE

PEER Center  
Peer Education & Evaluation Resource Center



Boston University School of Public Health



## THE PEER CENTER HELPS ORGANIZATIONS DEVELOP PEER PROGRAMS THAT SUPPORT PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV

No one understands the reality of HIV better than someone who lives with it every day. Peers – specially trained members of the community who are living with HIV/AIDS – support others who are learning to cope with the daily challenges of living with HIV. Peers give clients someone to turn to who has already “been there” and often form unique bonds with others in care. Because they are successfully coping with the challenges of HIV, peers have the power to serve as an important role model.

*“I think the most important thing my patients get from working with peer advocates is hope for the future. No matter how much I talk to them about the potential for them to live long and healthy lives, seeing someone living that promise is more powerful.”*

**Kathleen Clanon, MD**  
**Physician**  
**Alameda County Medical Center**  
**Oakland, CA**

## This is the idea behind the PEER Center.

The PEER Center helps plan and implement successful, sustainable peer programs that improve the quality of life for people living with HIV/AIDS. We offer the resources, support, and experience that help health care organizations launch a peer program, or strengthen one that's already in place. For a person facing an HIV diagnosis, we believe that peers can help close the gap between despair and hope for the future.

The PEER Center is a collaboration between the Boston University School of Public Health's Health & Disability Working Group and the Justice Resource Institute (JRI). We provide experience and expertise in implementing peer programs through three national peer education and capacity-building centers:

- **Lotus Project** in Oakland, CA – a collaboration between the Center for Health Training (CHT) and Women Organized to Respond to Life-Threatening Diseases (WORLD)
- **Peer Advanced Competency Training program (PACT)** at Harlem Hospital in New York, NY
- **People to People** in St. Louis and Kansas City, MO – a collaboration among the American Red Cross St. Louis Area Chapter, Kansas City Free Health Clinic, and Midwest AIDS Training and Education Center of Missouri

*“The doors have been opened for me to a different world than what I imagined in living with HIV. It is not the end, but the beginning.”*

*“I can talk to you about things I can't talk about with my doctor or social worker.”*

Comments from WORLD clients



CLOSING THE GAP BETWEEN

# AN INDIVIDUAL WITH HIV AND A COMPLEX HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

As members of the health care team, peers promote treatment adherence and foster trust in the health care system. They help clients navigate the sometimes intimidating world of HIV treatment and services by providing a range of support activities that include:

- Explaining the basics of HIV/AIDS and self-care to the newly diagnosed
- Connecting people with needed services
- Assisting with appointment reminders and transportation arrangements
- Accompanying clients to appointments
- Acting as a liaison between clients and their care providers

A peer's presence in a busy clinic or hospital can help close the gap between health care providers and people who need help adapting to a sometimes daunting treatment plan.

*“We launched a peer program to help our patients adhere to treatment regimens that in the last decade have become increasingly complex. Through the use of peers, we’ve seen an increase in the number of patients who stay in care and a decrease in our did-not-keep-appointment rates.”*

**Sally Neville, RN, MSN**  
**Director, HIV Primary Care**  
**Kansas City Free Health Clinic**  
**Kansas City, MO**

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# A SENSE OF FRUSTRATION AND A ONE-ON-ONE CONNECTION

**For people living with HIV/AIDS, the realities of treatment and self-care can be overwhelming. Through shared background, culture, language, and knowledge of the community, peers can relate to clients in a way that health care workers often can't. Peers offer encouragement and emotional support by:**

- Listening to clients' concerns and sharing similar experiences
- Offering strategies for incorporating medications and diet changes into a client's daily routine
- Serving as a "voice of experience" by proactively addressing and discussing shared medical issues
- Modeling healthy behaviors
- Facilitating support and education groups

Peers are a sympathetic and understanding shoulder to lean on, encouraging better self-care and reminding clients that they're not alone.

But it's not just clients who benefit. The peers themselves gain an increased sense of self-worth as they develop new skills, share their knowledge, and relate personal experiences as a way to help others. For both clients and peers struggling with the daily trials of living with HIV/AIDS, a peer relationship can play an important role in self-care.

*"For years I had heard that HIV can lie dormant in the body for up to 10 years. Once I understood how the disease progresses and how the meds work to slow it down, I knew I had to share this with newly infected people. I really wanted to ease their fears about dying and help them know why it's important to take their medications the right way."*

**Sheila Jackson**  
**a peer educator in**  
**St. Louis, MO**

*"It's great to be a peer. I like the connection. I like the confidence that I get, and that the client receives. I like seeing the client come in and reach a different level when they leave. Our clients became adherent, for the most part, and the T-cells started increasing and the viral loads started decreasing, and that is our success."*

**Jackie Howell**  
**on her work as a peer in**  
**Harlem Hospital**  
**New York, NY**



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# UNDERSTANDING THE NEED AND IMPLEMENTING A PROGRAM

The PEER Center and the three national centers are here to help you evaluate how a peer program can help you deliver the best quality care to your HIV-positive clients. We will provide you with all the tools you need to put a successful program in place and help you explore best practices. These include:

- Designing a peer program to meet your organization's unique needs and goals
- Integrating peers into your network of care
- Recruiting, compensating, and supervising peers in your care setting
- Providing training and education to peers and their supervisors
- Developing tools and metrics to measure the success of your peer program

The PEER Center can provide the resources and support you need to launch your own peer program, or strengthen the one you already have in place.

*“In the southern region, SisterLove, Inc. aims to strengthen our community with HIV-positive women in leadership roles. The Lotus Project has been instrumental in providing us the time, the effort and the support which made our work easier. When we talk about collaborations/networks across regions, the Lotus Project’s staff has been the supportive shoulders we can depend on.”*

Antoinette Barnes  
Bridge Leadership Program  
Coordinator, SisterLove, Inc., on her work with the Lotus Project, one of three national peer education and capacity-building centers associated with the PEER Center

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# LIMITED RESOURCES AND INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

**For health centers struggling with tight budgets, staffing constraints, and limited resources, launching and maintaining a peer program can seem unattainable. The PEER Center can help.**

The three national peer education and capacity-building centers have extensive hands-on experience and involvement with ongoing, successful peer programs. We draw on this experience to help organizations like yours address challenges around launching and growing a program — everything from working around budget constraints and identifying new funding sources to defining peer roles and responsibilities and soliciting buy-in from key stakeholders in your organization. The PEER Center understands the obstacles that stand in the way of launching a peer program and knows how to overcome them.

To learn more about the PEER Center, explore our program resources, or ask us a question, visit the PEER Center website at <http://www.hdwg.org/peercenter>



# PEER Center

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