

Integrating peer health navigators into healthcare settings

In this chapter, we explore issues related to integrating peer health navigators into teams in healthcare settings such as hospitals and clinics.

The literature and working group identified three activities related to integrating peer health navigators into a healthcare setting. The recommendations for the activities are described below, along with a review of the evidence for each. The activities are:

- Negotiate the integration of peer health navigators onto healthcare teams
- Orient staff in healthcare settings on peer health navigators in the work place
- Establish open communication channels between peer health navigators and other healthcare team members

Negotiate the integration of peer health navigators onto healthcare teams

RECOMMENDATION 1: Integrate peer health navigators into teams in healthcare settings and related environments as equal and engaged members of the healthcare team. (Type of evidence: research and practice)

Evidence

Community agencies hosting peer health navigation programs should consider formally partnering with HIV care teams in healthcare settings, such as hospitals and clinics, to provide more integrated healthcare services for clients. This should include work to determine how navigators can be integrated into existing healthcare services.

One of the roles of a peer health navigator is to work closely with a client's healthcare team to bring attention to gaps in care. Effective and collaborative relationships with clients and the healthcare team facilitate this role. Agencies that can create a supportive environment in healthcare settings for navigators may be more successful at

integrating navigators into healthcare settings.¹⁹⁴ For more information on the roles and responsibilities of peer health navigators, see Chapter 2.

Agencies should work with someone from the healthcare team who is committed to peer health navigation and can act as an internal champion among their colleagues.⁶⁸ Together with this internal champion, agencies can work with healthcare administrators and the healthcare team to develop a structure⁶⁸ for navigators to work in their setting. Guidelines⁶⁷ that outline how navigators will work with other staff, including social workers, nurses, pharmacists and doctors,^{51,194} is one way to provide structure to the integration of peers into healthcare settings.

Negotiation with healthcare administrators and the rest of the healthcare team should include extensive discussions that determine how peer health navigators will contribute to the team,⁵¹ based on the roles the agency has defined for its peer health navigators.

Discussions can include the level of integration of navigators on the team; each staff person's role and how that will be complemented by the work of a navigator; and the communication channels among team members, including peer health navigators.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Create new or adapt existing memoranda of understanding with healthcare teams to establish an official relationship between the peer health navigation program and the healthcare setting, if the program is not part of a healthcare organization. (Type of evidence: practice)

Evidence

This recommendation emerged from the practice expertise of the working group.

Orient staff in healthcare settings on peer health navigators in the work place

RECOMMENDATION 3: Orient social workers, nurses, pharmacists, doctors and other staff on the healthcare team who will work with peer health navigators. Before navigators join the team, discuss GIPA/MEPA and the importance of these principles; the specific roles and responsibilities of navigators; how their work can complement that of the rest of the healthcare team; how their work can improve the health and wellness of clients; and the potential for power imbalances to arise when service users become service providers. Discuss the need for flexibility and adaptation on the part of the navigators and the rest of the healthcare team to ensure peers are integrated equitably. Provide ample time to address staff concerns. (Type of evidence: research and practice)

Evidence

Staff in healthcare settings may not be used to working with peer workers as colleagues. It is important that staff, such as social workers, nurses, pharmacists and doctors, receive adequate orientation before peer health navigators join the healthcare team.^{63,71,194} Orientation can help healthcare staff to understand the value of peer health navigators to the work of the wider team and support their integration into it.

Orientation for healthcare staff should create a safe environment in which all staff can discuss their concerns about adding peer health navigators to the healthcare team.^{63,68,194} Discussions can address staff concerns and support them to accept peer health navigators as colleagues.⁷³ Staff orientation should also draw attention to the power imbalance that can exist between peer health navigators and other healthcare staff that may make it difficult for peer health navigators to contribute to team discussions and advocate for their clients.¹⁶⁷

Orientation sessions with healthcare team members should cover GIPA/MEPA;¹⁶⁶ information on the unique work of peers;^{49,71,170,209,216} and other peer health navigation programs and models that have been implemented, including evaluations that demonstrate the health benefits to clients and the potential cost-savings to the healthcare system.⁷¹

Orientation can also include information about peer health navigator roles and responsibilities^{63,68,71,152} that outlines how navigators will complement the work of the team;⁶⁸ how they will work with clients and other staff members;^{51,63} and how to include peer health navigators in team discussions about clients.^{68,71} Outlining the roles and responsibilities of navigators should clearly distinguish their work from the work of other staff members.³⁴

Establish open communication channels between peer health navigators and other healthcare team members

RECOMMENDATION 4: Establish open communication channels between peer health navigators and other healthcare team members. Communication channels may develop over time or may need to be established using mechanisms such as guidelines for respectful communication or regular all-team meetings. (Type of evidence: research and practice)

Evidence

Agencies that want to integrate peer health navigators into healthcare teams should work with their healthcare partners to establish clear and consistent communication channels between navigators and other healthcare staff.¹⁵² A lack of consistent communication can lead to the underuse or inappropriate use of peer health navigators.¹⁵²

Regular staff meetings are one way to create ongoing opportunities for the whole healthcare team to meet.^{32,49,51,63,66,68,152} If that is not feasible, peer health navigators can have regular meetings with one member of the healthcare team, such as a social worker or case manager,^{49,68} who then reports back to the rest of the healthcare team.

One-on-one mentoring is also a big part of how navigators and other healthcare team members communicate. When the clinic is slow, navigators ask healthcare staff about topics they feel they don't know enough about as a way to expand their knowledge and skills. In turn, healthcare staff often ask navigators about their personal experience as gay people, people who use drugs, or about other common experiences the navigators and their clients may share.

VIGNETTE *In a local clinic–community partnership to deliver peer navigation services, multiple formal and informal communication channels exist between peer health navigators and other healthcare team members. For example, navigators attend the regular staff meetings to discuss the day-to-day operations of the clinic, and participate in patient advisory meetings to provide feedback from patients. The peer health navigation program supervisor meets regularly with a member of the healthcare team to hear any staff issues or concerns related to the program and to bring attention to navigator concerns.*

Chapter 10

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