



# Community engagement and development for peer health navigation programs

In this chapter, we explore the ongoing community engagement and development work needed to support peer health navigators to work with external community-based agencies; for example, agencies that provide housing, substance use, mental health, settlement and culturally specific services.

The literature and working group identified five activities related to community engagement and development for peer health navigation programs. The recommendations for the activities are described below, along with a review of the evidence for each. The activities are:

- Consider a community engagement strategy
- Educate and engage other community agencies to support the peer health navigation program
- Create memoranda of understanding with community partners
- Support peer navigators to acquire and maintain up-to-date knowledge of community services
- Facilitate integration of peer health navigators into the community

## *Consider a community engagement strategy*

**RECOMMENDATION 1:** Consider the need to create a strategy to guide community engagement and development. (Type of evidence: practice)

## Evidence

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

### *Educate and engage community agencies to support the peer health navigation program*

**RECOMMENDATION 2:** Engage external community agencies to support the peer health navigation program before navigators work with clients in the community. (Type of evidence: research and practice)

## Evidence

As part of their role, peer health navigators interact with external community agencies, including making referrals on behalf of clients, accompanying clients to appointments, and attending community events. Extensive community development may be needed before introducing peer health navigators into external community agencies.<sup>65</sup> Community support for the peer health navigation program can facilitate referrals, the presence of peer health navigators in community agencies, and the work of navigators generally.<sup>73</sup>

The first step in engaging external community agencies may be creating an inventory of available community services.<sup>148</sup> Such an inventory gives program supervisors a list of agencies that can be engaged. Later it can serve as an inventory of programs and services to which peer health navigators may refer clients.

There are a number of ways that program supervisors can prepare external community agencies for working with peer health navigators. Program supervisors can leverage existing professional relationships to educate other agencies about the purpose of the program and the work of the peers.<sup>27,71</sup> Community agencies with which the host agency already has some relationships can also help identify other agencies where peer health navigators may need to refer or support clients.<sup>27</sup>

Program supervisors can also solicit input on the peer health program from external service providers,<sup>27,65,168</sup> and can attend community events to establish or strengthen relationships with potential partners.<sup>240</sup>

**RECOMMENDATION 3:** Engage external community agencies to support the peer health navigation program in an ongoing way after navigators have started to work with clients in the community. In support of GIPA/MEPA, facilitate opportunities for peer health navigators to participate as advisors to this process, as ambassadors for the program, or in other appropriate and relevant ways. (Type of evidence: practice)

## Evidence

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

**VIGNETTE** *Ryan, the peer health navigation program supervisor, and his team of peer health navigators are excited to have received the Certificate of Community Contribution in Healthcare, which acknowledges their ongoing community engagement work of the last year. Ryan now wants to formalize his team's existing informal collaborations with community agencies and initiate new ones. With input from the navigators, Ryan standardizes the referral process from the local First Nations health centre, secures satellite space for regular shifts for navigators at HIV testing clinics around the city, and signs a memorandum of understanding so that navigators can shadow service providers at two harm reduction agencies as part of their training.*

*The high point in the team's community engagement efforts is a finalized agreement between the peer health navigation program and the local medical school. Starting in the fall, peer health navigators will be hired as patient instructors for medical students.*

## *Create memoranda of understanding with community partners*

**RECOMMENDATION 4:** Create new or adapt existing memoranda of understanding with community partners to frame the work of peer health navigators in external community agencies. (Type of evidence: research and practice)

### **Evidence**

Peer health navigation programs should develop memoranda of understandings or partnership agreements with any external community agencies where peer health navigators may have a significant presence.<sup>27,71</sup>

These agreements can include any information that facilitates a collaborative working relationship between the peer health navigation program and external community agencies. This can include information related to the roles and responsibilities of both the host agency and its partners,<sup>27</sup> the process for making policy and process decisions that impact the work of navigators,<sup>27</sup> any referral pathways from peer health navigators to other service providers,<sup>71</sup> and the process for sharing information among navigators and program supervisors from the peer health navigation program and their community partners.<sup>71</sup>

## *Support peer health navigators to refer clients to external services*

**RECOMMENDATION 5:** Support peer health navigators to acquire and maintain up-to-date knowledge of available community and clinical services; provide access to information about external programs and services that may be relevant to clients to facilitate referrals from the peer navigator program. (Type of evidence: practice)

### **Evidence**

This recommendation emerged from the practice expertise of the working group

## *Facilitate integration of peer health navigators into the community*

**RECOMMENDATION 6:** Facilitate the integration of peer health navigators into external community agencies. (Type of evidence: research and practice)

### **Evidence**

Agencies should facilitate relationship building for peer health navigators. For example, agencies should facilitate networking between their peer health navigators and external community-based agencies and peer navigators from other health regions/organizations. Peers should not be expected to network on their own. Agencies can also support peer health navigators to meet with external agencies to mutually understand each other's mandate and start to develop a working relationship. Especially in the earlier phases of a peer health navigation program, any interaction between peer health navigators and external service providers will be an opportunity to build relationships.<sup>241</sup> One of the first ways to facilitate the integration of peer health navigators into external community agencies can be to invite staff from these agencies to lead training sessions for peer health navigators.<sup>158</sup> Participating in training for peer health navigators allows community agencies to share their expertise. It also allows staff from community agencies and the navigators to familiarize themselves with one another.

Peer health navigators should be given an inventory of community agencies with which the host agency has formal partnerships or with which the host agency often collaborates.<sup>34</sup> These community agencies should be encouraged to formally affiliate themselves with the health navigation program through a partnership agreement. This may ease peer navigator interactions with external service providers.<sup>26</sup>

Once peer health navigators start working, program supervisors should also actively introduce peer health navigators to other service providers,<sup>28,71,194,241</sup> such as intake staff in community agencies where peer health navigators may often refer or accompany clients.<sup>71</sup> Navigators should be encouraged to attend relevant community events where they can establish their own contacts with community partners.<sup>148</sup>

# Chapter 11

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CATIE would like to thank the following people for working with us to help produce these guidelines. Their time and knowledge were invaluable and much appreciated.

#### **Author**

Logan Broeckaert

#### **Editors**

Jason Altenberg, South Riverdale Community Health Centre  
Glen Bradford, Positive Living BC  
Laurel Challacombe, CATIE  
Miranda Compton, Vancouver Coastal Health  
Holly Gauvin, Elevate NWO  
Amanda Giacomazzo, CATIE  
Scott Harrison, Providence Health Care  
Kira Haug, ASK Wellness Centre  
Shazia Islam, Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention  
Christie Johnston, CATIE  
Murray Jose-Boerbridge, Toronto People With AIDS Foundation  
Erica Lee, CATIE  
Marvelous Muchenje, Women's Health in Women's Hands  
Community Health Centre  
Susanne Nicolay, Regina Qu'Appelle Health Region  
Mary Petty, Providence Health Care  
Sudin Sherchan, Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention  
Carol Strike, University of Toronto

#### **Copy Editor**

Zak Knowles

#### **Translation**

Alain Boutilier  
Alexandra Martin-Roche

#### **Design and Layout**

David Vereschagin/Quadrat Communications

#### **Reviewers**

Jamie Crossman, Regina Qu'Appelle Health Region  
Samantha Francois, Regina Qu'Appelle Health Region  
Nelson Hollinger, Regina Qu'Appelle Health Region  
Alexandra King, Lu'Ma Medical Centre  
Elgin Lim, Positive Living BC  
Bernie Mathieson, Regina Qu'Appelle Health Region  
Beth Rachlis, Ontario HIV Treatment Network  
Glyn Townson, Positive Living BC  
Gloria Tremblay, Regina Qu'Appelle Health Region  
Danita Wahpoosewyan, Regina Qu'Appelle Health Region

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