

UNDERSTANDING THE EFFECT OF COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS ON PEER SUPPORT STAFF AND PROGRAMS

Authors:

Clifton B¹, Murphy D¹, Philpot S¹, Brown G², Prestage G¹

¹ The Kirby Institute, UNSW Sydney ² Centre for Social Impact, UNSW Sydney

Background:

HIV community organisations have long provided peer support for people living with HIV (PLHIV), mostly in person, with the goal of improving health and quality of life. We explored how social distancing restrictions due to COVID-19 affected the delivery of peer support programs as well as the personal impact upon staff.

Methods:

Qualitative interviews with 21 HIV support program staff across Australia were conducted to identify how social distancing restrictions and working from home policies impacted service provision. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted.

Results:

HIV organisations embraced working from home and video conferencing platforms to deliver peer support services to PLHIV across Australia. Peer workers cited social isolation and mental health as the main concerns among PLHIV community members and reoriented peer support initiatives to address these issues. Benefits included more flexible working arrangements and feeling supported by their employer, and the embrace of online platforms to perform peer support work, which enabled connection with PLHIV who would not have been able to attend in person. However, socio-economic factors created barriers for some PLHIV to engage with peer support video conferencing, due to the high cost of internet and access to a pc or smart phone. A loss social contact with peers and colleagues, difficulty learning to facilitate using video conferencing, and the blurring of work and home environments were also cited by peer workers as challenges within these interviews.

Conclusion:

HIV community organisations embraced new ways of delivering peer support programs throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, both in mode of delivery and to appropriately incorporate social distancing restrictions. Staff were adaptable to these changes, and reported benefits of working from home, as well as challenges relating to lack of contact with their peers.

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