

Service provider experiences of adapting peer support for people living with HIV through COVID-19

Authors:

Clifton B¹, Murphy DA¹, Hilton P², Philpot S¹, Brown G², Prestage G¹ on behalf of the RISE study team.

¹The Kirby Institute, University of NSW, Sydney, Australia; ² Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia

Background:

The Australian response to the COVID-19 pandemic has affected how Australian HIV organisations deliver services to their clients across state and territory jurisdictions. We present findings on how COVID-19 has affected service provision by HIV community organisations.

Methods:

In the RISE study, we have conducted 15 qualitative interviews with HIV support program staff across Australia to identify how COVID-19 and the restrictions imposed on movement and gatherings have impacted service provision. Interviews and thematic analysis are ongoing.

Results:

COVID-19 has affected how community organisations offer most peer support programs. Use of technology, particularly videoconferencing, has allowed peer workers to continue to offer one-on-one peer support and expedited new online workshops and webinars. Challenges for the workforce include the loss of volunteering opportunities and less face-to-face time for staff, accentuating feelings of disconnection to their workplace and the communities with which they work. Emerging issues for their clients include isolation, poor mental health outcomes, and treatment access among Medicare-ineligible people living with HIV. Videoconferencing has highlighted a technology gap for some older and socio-economically disadvantaged clients. Experiences of COVID-19 vary across jurisdictions, reflecting the differential impact of the local epidemic and the restrictions within each state.

Conclusion:

COVID-19 has disrupted traditional models of peer support in the context of a physical space. Some changes to how peer support is offered may be for an unknown time period, but other changes may be permanent. Digital peer-based support will remain part of the service mix for community organisations. These changes may affect the nature of peer support and how HIV community organisations seek to continue to meet the diverse needs of their clients.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

The Kirby Institute and the Australian Research Centre in Sex Health and Society are supported by the Australian Government Department of Health. The RISE study is funded by a National Health and Medical Research Council Partnership Project. Gilead provided funds to support aspects of the conduct of this study.