Prison-Based Peer Health Education: Understanding Benefits to Inmates, Institutions and Communities

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Presenters

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• Communicable and Chronic Disease Intervention Coordinator, Oregon Department of Corrections

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• Infectious Disease Physician, WA State DOC, Correctional Program Director, Northwest AETC, Clinical Assistant Professor, University of Washington

Joseph Bick, MD
• Chief Medical Executive, California Medical Facility, Vacaville, California
1. Introductions; audience experience and expectations (Brockmann)
2. Experiences administering prison-based peer-led health education programs (Lifshay and Shindo)
3. Experiences as prison administrators in facilities with such programming (Bick and Strick)
4. Open discussion of questions about and experiences with successful (and unsuccessful) prison-based peer-led health education programming (20 minutes)
Who do we mean by peer educators?

Prison-based peer educators may include:

- Currently incarcerated individuals
- Formerly incarcerated individuals
- Members of the community

For our purposes, we are focusing on engaging and training current inmates as peer educators.
Why we care about the health of inmates

• 12-18% of HIV infected Americans have been incarcerated
• 30% of HCV infected Americans have been incarcerated
• 35% of Americans with active tuberculosis have been incarcerated
• 75% of inmates have axis 1 or 2 mental disorders
• 75% of inmates have alcohol or other substance abuse disorders
Benefits of peer-based prisoner education to peer educators

• Improve self-confidence, fulfillment, empowerment
• Offer escape from daily inmate life; reduce feelings of frustration and helplessness; lessen negative effects of the prison environment
• Teaching may help to internalize lessons on behavior change
• Leadership and vocational skills, and accreditation (e.g. testing support, HIV education, injection drug education, peer counseling); increase rates of post-release employment
Advantages of peer-based educators

Supportive environment for learning and engaging an often difficult-to-engage population

- Fewer distractions and temptations on the inside in theory
- Peer educators often more acceptable to other inmates
  - Shared experiences; deemed more credible, reliable and pragmatic sources of information; more trust between peers
  - Able to communicate in culturally and ethnically relevant ways
  - Less fear of judgment; sense of solidarity
  - More precise understanding of risk behaviors both within and without correctional settings
Benefits of peer-based prisoner education to administrators

- Reductions in recidivism and disciplinary infractions
- Build an additional channel of communication between staff and inmates in a collaborative, professional manner
- Can reduce demand on professional counseling staff
Benefits of peer-based prisoner education to community and families

• Leave prison with a better potential for employment, armed with new skills
• Educators and participating prisoners return to family and community with better knowledge of behaviors that facilitate infectious disease transmission and better overall understanding of health issues generally
Objections to peer-based prisoner education

- Potential accountability, confidentiality, and miseducation issues
- Problematic perceptions of authority/abuse of power
- Cost of training and supervision within already tight budgets
Thank you!

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