PEER OUTREACH WORKERS AS INTERPRETERS
Improving Newcomer Health Through Adding Interpreter Qualifications To The Peer Support Role
Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services
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Promising Practices Model: Peer Outreach Workers as Interpreters

In 2002, Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services developed the Peer Outreach Worker (POW) model. Peer women are recruited from high needs communities and participate in a multi-year training program as paid employees. In this role, they learn skills, participate in, and eventually lead, the following activities:

- Reach out to immigrant/refugee families & children, sharing experiences, language and culture;
- Link families to services, overcome barriers, increase access to health opportunities;
- Nurture social support networks, reducing isolation;
- Accompanying clients to agencies such as school and housing boards, social assistance programs, citizenship and immigration services, and other non-profit agencies;
- Contribute to local community capacity building.

POW responsibilities include:

- Outreach to isolated newcomer families in under-resourced neighbourhoods;
- Information and referrals to health and social services;
- Assistance in organizing and facilitating a wide range of workshops (parenting, fitness, healthy eating, expressive arts, etc.);
- Accompanying clients to agencies such as school and housing boards, social assistance programs, citizenship and immigration services, and other non-profit agencies;
- Providing language support.

Based on program evaluation results, as well as peer feedback and community need, in 2008 Access Alliance decided to formally integrate the role of community interpreter into the Peer Outreach Worker model and ensure all peers were tested and trained as per the Canadian National Standards. All peers are now fully qualified community interpreters and are able to formally exercise this role as required while working in the field.

Adding the role of community interpreter formally into the peer outreach role acknowledges the overlap between the role of peer outreach workers and community interpreters in the field. This provides additional benefits to service providers and clients, both within Access Alliance and externally at partner agencies and other institutions. Specific benefits include:

1. Increased capacity to reach out to emerging communities: the peer outreach model provides flexibility and local responsiveness where trained interpreters are not available.
2. Increased service capacity for Access Alliance and partner agencies by making professional interpretation locally available in settings where there previously was none.
3. Improved service delivery as a result of peers supporting the communication process, negotiating cultural differences appropriately, enhancing mutual understanding.
4. Additional skills training for peers improves their future employment prospects. Qualifications in language interpretation gives increased professional edge for interpretation and for interfacing with service providers.

The Peer Outreach Worker/Language Interpreter model has experienced some challenges in its development:

1. POWs need to be supported to negotiate the overlap between roles of community interpreter and outreach worker. This is facilitated by having clear role definitions in both cases and training to support managing those roles.
2. As POWs often live (or are “embedded”) in the same neighborhood where they do outreach and provide service, they have to manage expectations from community members that go beyond their role. The lines between their professional and private lives can become blurred.
3. POWs have to strive for a balance between the peer outreach role and the community interpreter role to ensure one role does not dominate, thereby causing planning services to be eroded.

Sustainability

This approach enhances organizational capacity to provide interpretation at a community level where none was available before. In the long term, will program outcomes be eroded by time and resources being spent on interpretation? If this is perceived to be the case, will this ultimately affect perceptions of the program’s value and funding levels? One of the intended outcomes for this program is enhanced employability of the peer women. Incorporating community interpreter training has demonstrated success in enhancing employability, evident as peers have gone on to be employed at Access Alliance as well as other community agencies.

Access Alliance’s long term capacity to support this program is affected by government funding levels and we are living though a period of retrenchment and cutbacks. However, this initiative does illustrate the value and power of partnerships leveraging skills and capacities of the peer women and strategic use of resources.

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