

PRISONER HEALTH IS COMMUNITY HEALTH: OUTCOMES OF A PRISON-BASED PEER EDUCATION PROJECT IN NEW MEXICO PRISONS

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Background:

Prisoners have high rates of communicable diseases and substance use. Ninety-five percent of people in prisons are eventually released back into their communities. Prisoners are being released back into the community in large numbers with untreated communicable diseases and ongoing addiction. Prisons provide unique opportunities to reach a disenfranchised and underserved population and improve public health.

Methods:

The New Mexico Peer Education Project (NMPEP) is a prison-based peer education model incorporating wide dissemination of quality health education utilizing community health worker models and harm reduction theory. NMPEP staff provide a comprehensive 40-hour training to incarcerated persons to help develop health education knowledge, disease prevention strategies, group facilitation and public speaking skills. Once trained, peer educators co-facilitate 10-hour workshops to others incarcerated with emphasis on harm reduction and promotion of behavior change. Pre and post training surveys were collected from peer educators (N=167) and their students (N=1,113). Focus groups (N=57) and individual interviews (N=19) were held with peer educators to assess the long-term impact of the project.

Results:

The NMPEP trained 495 peer educators who have trained 8,666 others incarcerated since June 2009. 167 peer educators and 1,113 of their students participated in the surveys. Statistically significant changes were identified in areas of knowledge, self-efficacy, behavior intention and attitudes. Four themes were identified by focus groups: increased respect from peers and prison staff, improved self-efficacy, confidence and self-esteem, ability to share information in and out of prison, and increased responsibility and passion to help others.

Conclusions:

Evaluation of the NMPEP demonstrated significant, positive results in knowledge, self-efficacy, behavior intention and attitudes. Peer education in a prison setting is an effective model for wide dissemination of health education and promotion of behavior change. Peer educators develop feelings of empowerment and sense of community as a result of involvement with NMPEP.

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