

“GET THERE TOGETHER” HIV EDUCATION

“GET THERE TOGETHER” HIV EDUCATION is a group level intervention designed to help formerly incarcerated, HIV+ men and women improve their health and relationships with medical providers by providing them with information on HIV infection and treatment. The key characteristics of “Get There Together” HIV Education are: the participant-driven, flexible course curriculum; the holistic approach to HIV education; the comfortable, non-judgmental environment; and the participants’ sharing of personal stories and knowledge.

CURRENT ACTIVITY SETTING

Community-Based Service Organization for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals, HIV Education Programs

Directly links the client to medical care

- ✓ Gets the client in a conversation about starting medical care
- Brings the agency closer to where HIV+ people are so that the conversation can begin

I. DESCRIPTION

OBJECTIVES

- ▶ To help de-stigmatize HIV within the participant population
- ▶ To provide current and accurate HIV information for individuals, families, and communities who are living with or are at risk for HIV infection
- ▶ To provide clients with a better understanding of HIV related medications
- ▶ To empower participants to improve their relationships with medical providers
- ▶ To decrease HIV incidence

POPULATION SERVED

- ▶ HIV+ individuals using substances, HIV+ individuals who are homeless and/or formerly incarcerated
- ▶ HIV+ gay/bisexual/transgender individuals
- ▶ Caregivers of HIV+ individuals

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION

“Get There Together” HIV Education is an eight week intensive course for HIV+ individuals who have been recently released from incarceration. It provides participants with accurate, up-to-date information on living with HIV and a support system in a peer learning environment.



QUICK NOTES:

“Many times people project their own beliefs on others. We think, ‘They’re not going to like this or that,’ but we can be very wrong.”

—DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS

Curriculum Development

- ▶▶ Through focus groups and discussions with currently and formerly incarcerated individuals living with HIV, the agency determines the greatest informational needs within the target population.
- ▶▶ The staff (including executive, transitional services, and case management staff) develops a 24-class curriculum based on a review of the gathered information. Class topics include HIV infection, treatment, and disclosure, substance use relapse prevention, safer sex practices, stress management, domestic violence, and the use of meditation.
- ▶▶ The staff establishes a schedule for both day and evening classes and selects trainers. Trainers can be selected from qualified agency staff members, the local and state health departments, and various community agencies.
- ▶▶ Each session has its assigned trainer, plus a few peers (often course graduates). For particularly challenging topics, such as domestic violence, additional staff attends.
- ▶▶ Each class cycle, with meetings on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays for eight weeks, includes ten 45-minute break-out sessions. In each break-out session, facilitated by attending peers, participants discuss the course material most recently covered and what they have learned.

Participant Recruitment

- ▶▶ The agency sends an announcement, via fax, to other service agencies in the community. The announcement details the program and eligibility for enrollment and requests that the agencies refer eligible clients who could benefit from the classes.
- ▶▶ Follow-up calls are placed to agencies to confirm receipt of the information and to further encourage referrals of clients.

Registration

- ▶▶ Registration for the classes is offered in the morning and afternoon.
- ▶▶ On the day of registration, former graduates and peers greet arriving participants and answer general questions.
- ▶▶ Refreshments are provided in the registration room.
- ▶▶ Participants receive numbers upon arrival indicating their order for registration.
- ▶▶ When called, participants register with one of two staff members.
- ▶▶ In the interest of privacy, registration occurs at a distance from the participant waiting area.
- ▶▶ Registrants complete a demographic information form and specify their preference for day or evening classes. They must provide documentation of their HIV status. Those who do not bring this documentation at the time of registration must bring it by a later specified date.
- ▶▶ Participants receive course instructions and schedules.

Course Expectations

- ▶▶ All participants are permitted one absence during the course cycle. If participants miss two classes, they are required to complete a “make-up” assignment, such as writing an essay on an HIV or another health-related topic, to qualify for graduation.
- ▶▶ If participants miss three classes, they are dropped from the course. Dropped participants or those whose circumstances force withdrawal from the course, may re-enroll in the next cycle.
- ▶▶ This attendance policy is made clear to all participants at the start of the course.

Opening Class

- ▶▶ The first class opens with meditative music followed by an official welcome by an executive staff member from the agency.
- ▶▶ Next, the staff member discusses the services offered by the agency, describes the course, introduces the curriculum, and explains the ground rules for participation.
- ▶▶ Participants are each assigned a counselor with whom they can discuss issues addressed in class.
- ▶▶ Participants receive nametags and binders for course materials.
- ▶▶ The trainer then initiates an icebreaking “name” game to facilitate introductions among participants.

General Format of Classes

- ▶▶ Each class lasts two hours, beginning with three minutes of music and dance to “shake off the outside stuff.”
- ▶▶ The next three minutes are dedicated to voluntary, quiet meditation. The executive staff member introduces participants to a thought for reflection and provides instructions on how to do the meditation. This exercise helps participants center themselves, build trust, and feel safe.
- ▶▶ Agency announcements follow the meditation.
- ▶▶ The first hour of class begins with the trainer presenting the theme for the day, after which participants have a 15-minute break.
- ▶▶ When the class reassembles, participants are divided into breakout groups of six to eight people. Facilitated by a course graduate, each group takes a separate room for thirty minutes of discussion about the material covered. Participants talk about what they have learned so far and how this new knowledge will affect their lives.
- ▶▶ All participants return to the main classroom. One person from each breakout group presents highlights from their group conversation.
- ▶▶ The class closes with a three-minute meditation.
- ▶▶ Fare cards for public transportation are distributed to participants who require them.

Special Classes

- ▶▶ Based on the comfort level of participants, special activities are developed for certain classes. For example, there is a sexual health “carnival.”
- ▶▶ The classroom is decorated and booths are set up with games and information to update participants’ sexual health knowledge.
- ▶▶ Participants obtain a carnival “passport” by checking in with their respective counselors, who update the information collected during registration.
- ▶▶ In the last 45 minutes of class time, participants break into groups by gender to discuss issues like self-esteem, grooming, and accepting responsibility for family, sexual behavior, and partner disclosure.

Preparing for Graduation

- ▶▶ During week six of the program, participants are allotted time to begin developing skits, which they will perform at the graduation ceremony.
- ▶▶ During week seven, participants are reminded about graduation and receive volunteer sign-up forms to complete if they wish to become peer facilitators for future classes. Interested participants submit the sign-up form and, in subsequent weeks, are interviewed by agency staff.

Closing Class

- ▶▶ At the beginning of the final class session, all agency staff, peers, and volunteers form a circle around the participants and thank them for their participation and perseverance with the following statement: “We’re here to thank you, to surround you with love and support.” Encouraging words emphasize that this final class marks a beginning for everyone to keep themselves healthy.
- ▶▶ The lights are dimmed for a brief meditation.
- ▶▶ As the lights come back up, the staff plays “Ain’t No Stopping Us Now” to lead the class into dance. Afterwards, participants hug and thank each other, affirming a festive and supportive atmosphere.

Graduation

- ▶▶ An appropriate location is selected and reserved for the graduation ceremony.
- ▶▶ Guest speakers are invited.
- ▶▶ All agency staff members are invited to the ceremony, and those who express interest in attending are encouraged to deliver a spoken message to the graduates.
- ▶▶ Participants perform their skits, which cover a variety of topics including HIV prevention, substance abuse and relapse prevention, and domestic violence.
- ▶▶ Previous graduates attending the ceremony are recognized.
- ▶▶ Lastly, each graduating participant receives a “Certificate of Completion” in a formal graduation ceremony. Participants with perfect attendance receive special recognition on their certificates.

PROMOTION OF ACTIVITY

- ▶▶ Agency outreach to community-based organizations through faxes, phone calls, and linkage agreements
- ▶▶ Discharge planners in correctional facilities talk with inmates about the classes.
- ▶▶ Brochures and flyers in correctional facilities and hospitals
- ▶▶ Health fairs in correctional facilities
- ▶▶ Street outreach
- ▶▶ Word of mouth

II. LOGISTICS

STAFF REQUIRED

- ▶▶ Executive staff to develop the curriculum and to participate in first class session
- ▶▶ Licensed social worker to review the curriculum
- ▶▶ Three counselors to provide support to the participants
- ▶▶ Three department directors and two assistant directors to serve as trainers and to assist with the curriculum development

TRAINING & SKILLS

- ▶▶ All facilitators must have excellent skills in training and communications. They should possess a high school diploma and demonstrate an understanding of the challenges faced by the target populations and an acceptance of all client situations.
- ▶▶ All staff must be well-versed on HIV infection, medications, and treatment adherence.

PLACE OF ACTIVITY

The activity takes place at the agency, primarily in a classroom setting. Team breakout sessions require smaller rooms with a classroom style set-up.

FREQUENCY OF ACTIVITY

Five, eight-week course cycles are offered each year.

OUTSIDE CONSULTANTS

Guest speakers or presenters (occasionally paid)

SUPPORT SERVICES

The agency provides fare cards for public transportation to all participants.

CONDITIONS NECESSARY FOR IMPLEMENTATION

- ▶▶ A strong community referral process and community network must exist for stakeholders to know about the program and refer their clients.
- ▶▶ A pool of trainers and guest speakers knowledgeable about HIV as it relates to the criminal justice system must be available.
- ▶▶ The agency must have up-to-date HIV information.

III. STRENGTHS AND DIFFICULTIES

STRENGTHS

- ▶▶ The activity provides a setting that is comfortable and serene, which encourages bonding among participants.
- ▶▶ The sharing of personal stories and knowledge among participants promotes peer learning.
- ▶▶ Strong participant-trainer relationships are formed.
- ▶▶ Participants receive accurate and up-to-date information about HIV infection and treatment.

WEAKNESSES

- ▶▶ The curriculum needs constant reviewing and frequent revision to fit the complex social dynamics and particular needs of each cycle's participants.
- ▶▶ The information presented can be too complex for some participants.

DIFFICULTIES FOR CLIENTS

- ▶▶ The course is too long for some participants, too short for others.
- ▶▶ Some of the information, though very basic, is still too technical for some participants.
- ▶▶ The time commitment for the eight week course can limit participation. A participant may have to withdraw from the class because of unanticipated circumstances or conflicting appointments.
- ▶▶ Some participants may feel "closed" to other participants' sexual identities or life experiences.

DIFFICULTIES FOR STAFF

- ▶▶ Frustrations over overscheduled clients who must drop the class
- ▶▶ Some participants who are more knowledgeable may try to dominate the class.

OBSTACLES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

- ▶▶ The relationship between substance use and HIV infection is not fully appreciated within the community.
- ▶▶ The implications of HIV infection within the criminal justice system is not fully understood by the community.
- ▶▶ Many agency clients lack an understanding of primary medical care.
- ▶▶ The benefits of alternative therapies such as meditation and acupuncture are not widely known and consequently go under-funded.

ACTIVITY NOT SUITED FOR

- ▶▶ Participants exhibiting aggressive behavior are escorted out of the class and may not return until the next class.
- ▶▶ Violent participants are expelled.

IV. OUTCOMES

EVALUATION

- ▶▶ Past participants give testimonials during subsequent cycles.
- ▶▶ Agency staff observes changes in the behavior of participants who join the agency as peers.
- ▶▶ Observation of participant information sharing and peer encouragement throughout the course

- ▶ Through regular meetings, counselors track and report on participant engagement in care, CD4 counts, and viral loads.
- ▶ The agency employs an intake and mid-cycle assessment tool. The mid-cycle instrument includes a participant feedback form.
- ▶ Agency staff conducts periodic follow-up with graduates.

EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS

- ▶ Participant testimonials often mention increased success in managing the health care system and greater overall stability of life.
- ▶ Client surveys show that participants are more comfortable discussing and seeking care. They are connecting to doctors and medical care “they can stay with.”
- ▶ Periodic follow-up with graduates reveals that some participants enroll in additional HIV related classes.
- ▶ Participants exhibit a better understanding of HIV.
- ▶ Increases in participants’ CD4 counts
- ▶ Few participants return to jail or prison.
- ▶ Participants obtain stable housing and maintain a more stable life.
- ▶ Participants manage their anger and anxiety better.
- ▶ Participants learn to take medications properly.
- ▶ During class, participants share information with others on their medical care, such as the positive experiences they have had with a certain hospital or provider.
- ▶ Graduates of the program return to the agency and share their success stories.

UNANTICIPATED BENEFITS

The graduation certificate has proven helpful to participants in their search for permanent employment.

“CONNECTING TO CARE” ELEMENTS OF ACTIVITY

- ▶ Participants receive new tools to successfully manage their relationships with medical providers.
- ▶ People learn about HIV, other diseases, and the consequences of not engaging in medical care.
- ▶ Disclosure of trainers helps participants open up.
- ▶ The peer-to-peer component gives participants a new, unthreatening avenue to understanding HIV disease, helps them to build skills, and allows them to safely share their experiences and knowledge about HIV.
- ▶ Participants are able to think in a new way about their life situations in the safe and tranquil space the classes offer them.
- ▶ The activity provides a roadmap for participants, which helps them to build and maintain relationships with the medical establishment.
- ▶ Participants learn about drug-use relapse prevention, one of their most critical needs.

KEEP IN MIND...

- ▶ Don’t project your own beliefs on the participants. Be receptive to their ideas and opinions.
- ▶ Be open to all the ideas and suggestions from staff members, including counselors, case managers, and outreach workers who have the strongest connection with clients.
- ▶ Consider pursuing funding from private donors for the elements of the course that other funding streams cannot or do not support.
- ▶ Hold the classes in a space that is easily accessible to participants; provide for transportation.
- ▶ Accept clients for who they are and accept their current choices.
- ▶ Inform and educate the community about the agency’s objectives for the program.
- ▶ Make sure that agency staff has a clear understanding of course objectives.