DEVELOPING SUSTAINABLE AND PRACTICAL EVALUATION OF PEER BASED PROGRAMS IN COMPLEX ENVIRONMENTS: OUTCOMES OF THE W3 PROJECT

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Background:
The unprecedented developments in prevention and treatment in HIV are resulting in major changes in community, policy and practice, and highlighting the importance of peer based community programs. However, these programs have faced many challenges in demonstrating their impact. This project used a complex systems theory of peer-based programs to develop ways to demonstrate the quality and impact of peer-based programs in a complex and changing environment.

Approach:
Over an 18-month period, we collaborated with peer staff at Living Positive Victoria and Harm Reduction Victoria to develop approaches to evaluate peer-based programs at the project and organisational level. Drawing on the W3 Framework for peer programs (www.w3project.org.au) we applied the key functions of peer-based programs (Engagement, Alignment, Adaptation and Influence) and took an action research approach to develop quality and impact evaluation tools that are usable, practical and sustainable within the resources of a community organisation.

Outcomes:
This study developed, trialled and refined 12 quality and impact data collection tools across a range of peer-led programs. These included evaluating: the quality of peer interactions in workshops and one-one peer support; the reach and scope of peer outreach; the impact of programs on quality of life and resilience; the role of partner organisations and services; and collating and translating evolving community trends into persuasive policy and service advice. We have also applied the W3 Framework to identify relevant indicators that align with contracting requirements of funders.

Significance:
This has been a ground breaking project to use complex systems approaches to develop a better understanding of how peer-based programs and leadership can be planned and evaluated. We argue that to enhance peer based programs and leadership, we need practical and sustainable evaluation approaches that support learning and adaptation within the whole community, health service and policy system in which they operate.