

INTER-AGENCY NETWORKING is a community level intervention designed to establish a community services “safety net” for people living with HIV who fall through the cracks of HIV medical care and community support systems. The key characteristics of the Inter-Agency Network are: the exchange of information and the sharing of community resources between agencies; the informal structure of the network which supports rotating leadership; the opportunity for key agency personnel to meet and discuss community service options; and the capacity of the network to serve all persons living with HIV within the service area of the network members.

CURRENT ACTIVITY SETTING
AIDS Service Organization, General

- ✓ 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 facilitate the exchange of information between agencies about client needs and available services
- ▶ To minimize the frequency of individuals “falling out” of care services by establishing an interagency safety net.
- ▶ To foster the sharing of community resources among agencies
- ▶ To nourish the collaboration between agencies and the access to a network of resources within the community
- ▶ To generate professional peer support among health service providers

TARGET AUDIENCE

- ▶ HIV+ females and males, 20 to 45 years of age who know their HIV status and are not in treatment.
- ▶ People with high risk for HIV exposure, dually diagnosed individuals, substance users, people with unstable housing.

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION

The inter-agency network is a vehicle by which executive directors can facilitate increased understanding across multiple agencies about individual agency, client, and community needs. As an informal network, where agencies commit what resources they can offer, the inter-agency network provides a forum to raise and discuss issues among community agencies and staff.



QUICK NOTES:

“Give the process time to develop. Give the other agencies the time to learn about HIV and each other.”

— PROGRAM COORDINATOR, ANCHORAGE, ALASKA

Development and implementation:

- ▶ Create the basic objective for the network and communicate this to the greater community of agencies. It is important to start at the executive director level to get their support and agency participation. It is a good idea to begin with providers who are already a part of the lead agency's current network.
- ▶ Identify 5 to 10 key agencies and bring them together to start discussing how the different professionals and programs within their agencies could meet and interact.
- ▶ The executive directors who take a leadership role should help facilitate the first meetings with the objective of outlining the purpose of the network. The group should decide how often the meetings should take place, the times, and the length of the meetings.
- ▶ Each meeting needs a facilitator (who should be selected for a specified term - one year, for example) to manage the meetings. The facilitator should help to empower the group by determining what type of information would be useful for the members of the group. This helps to identify the needs that can be addressed in the meetings.
- ▶ In the first meeting, each agency briefly describes what it does and what it provides to the community.
- ▶ At every subsequent meeting, each agency takes turns describing in detail what their agency or program does to inform or remind attendees about that agency.
- ▶ The theme selection and frequency can be organized according to group information needs (e.g., domestic violence — quarterly; substance abuse — quarterly; health care providers — monthly; Rotary Club — every 6 months; homeless — quarterly).
- ▶ In order for the network to be successful, the meetings must balance seriousness with informality. For instance, no minute-taking or formal agendas. If the format is too formal or bureaucratic then people will not want to do it.
- ▶ Attendance at a network meeting must not generate homework. Participants should get the feeling that it is a “gathering” and learning space.
- ▶ The environment and feel of the group is very important. Cultivate a relaxed, open environment where the group works together to identify areas for collaboration. The group defines its own purpose and goals and creates the rules for how the group functions.
- ▶ Establishing a community services safety net should be a purposefully stated objective of the group. This common goal gives group members a tangible reason to attend the meetings and support the network. The purpose of the network is also to identify and share information and common experiences. The members of the initial network might have other networks to which they can link members of the group as well; this opens the door to additional resources. It will take the network time to develop; it's important to be patient and let the other agencies have the time they need to learn about HIV and to learn about each other.

PROMOTION OF ACTIVITY

Participants communicate meeting times and places via an internet mailing listserv. Agencies also hear about the network meetings by word of mouth.

II. Logistics

STAFF REQUIRED

The appropriate staff related to the topic of the meeting. It is important to have all levels of staff at the meetings, not just executive directors.

TRAINING & SKILLS

The skills required by the staff positions

PLACE OF ACTIVITY

The group decides where the meetings can take place: coffee house, agency office, lunch venues.

FREQUENCY OF ACTIVITY

The frequency is determined by group

OUTSIDE CONSULTANTS

Bring outside experts who are topic specific to individual meetings

SUPPORT SERVICES

If there are any support services necessary, the group can share in providing those services.

CONDITIONS NECESSARY FOR IMPLEMENTATION

The executive directors of agencies should get together and commit to starting this network. Professionals with leadership vision must put it together initially.

III. Strengths and Difficulties

STRENGTHS

- ▶▶ The shared goal of establishing a community services safety net gives people a tangible reason to attend the meetings and support the network. People won't collaborate just for the sake of collaboration.
- ▶▶ Creating a relaxed, non-bureaucratic environment keeps people involved without the pressure of "added work."
- ▶▶ Peer support and mentoring: seasoned veterans train and prepare unseasoned staff.
- ▶▶ The exchange of information: the network can become a wonderful referral system for all professionals.

WEAKNESSES

The lack of a formal structure can be difficult; the network is dependent on humans collaborating together, which doesn't always work smoothly.

DIFFICULTIES FOR CLIENTS

The participating agency's clients can begin to feel like the networking between service providers breaks confidentiality and invades their privacy. Clients could begin to feel that all their service providers know too much and put too much pressure on them to act in a certain way. The clients could feel like there is "no escape" when they want to be left alone to live their life as they see fit.

DIFFICULTIES FOR STAFF

- ▶▶ Professionals have yet another meeting to attend.
- ▶▶ The network may involve working with an agency that another agency doesn't support or disagrees with their mission and philosophy.
- ▶▶ Meetings that are not well facilitated may feel a little loose and chaotic.

OBSTACLES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

- ▶▶ Generating support for the network and securing the different agencies' participation can be an obstacle for the smooth development of the network.
- ▶▶ The hardest part of this network is keeping the promotion of its existence circulating within the service provider community.

“There are just not enough doctors who understand HIV treatment.”

— PROGRAM COORDINATOR, ANCHORAGE, ALASKA

NON-APPROPRIATE CLIENTS

None

IV. Outcomes

EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS

- ▶ Filling the cracks in the service community can be seen and felt, and the safety net expansion is noticed by the different agencies. Clients do not find themselves without the appropriate services as much as they did before the network started. The clients' needs are better addressed and access to the clients is increased.
- ▶ Due to the sharing of resources, materials and information, some agencies can actually begin to save money in their resource budgets; for some programs there is a general decrease in overhead spending.
- ▶ Because people are working together there is a more positive attitude within the entire service community.

UNANTICIPATED BENEFITS

- ▶ The collaboration creates an enjoyable work environment both in the office and in the meeting spaces.
- ▶ The knowledge of other agency's portfolios provides informal training opportunities for staff.
- ▶ The sharing of resources can save overhead costs of some program budgets.
- ▶ The network can generate grant writing collaborations as well as the possibility of new funding sources.

“CONNECTING TO CARE” ELEMENTS OF ACTIVITY

- ▶ If a person (client) needing health services falls through the cracks in the service community there will be an agency or provider in the right place at the right time to help connect them back to services; this is the idea of the safety net.
- ▶ The more agencies connect to the network, the bigger the net becomes to help connect people to the care they need.
- ▶ The network is a great referral system; it is very effective in getting the word out about all the available health services to the target client populations.

EVALUATION

The network meetings are evaluated based on attendance, participation, and feedback from members.

KEEP IN MIND...

- ▶ It's not necessary to make the network bureaucratic. The meetings need to be conducted in a professional manner, but the network should stay informal.
- ▶ The network should be driven by all levels of staff, not just the executive directors.
- ▶ The participants of the meetings need to connect with their counterparts in the other agencies: directors to directors, case managers to case managers, outreach workers to outreach workers, etc.
- ▶ Turnover in membership is a normal part of the process.
- ▶ Ask along the way if it is working for each participating agency.
- ▶ Flexibility and open-mindedness are important attitudes to maintain in the development and implementation of the network.
- ▶ Not everyone in the service community has to be a member of the network; some people can present topics.
- ▶ It is important that all participants understand the common goal of the network. It gives people a tangible reason to attend the meetings. As new members come into the network, repeat the objectives so that people remember the reason for the group's existence.

