CBR*Tips*

Compensating Peer Researchers

Background

In community-based research, compensating people with lived experience to participate actively in the research process is a common practice. Peer research associates (PRAs), as these individuals are often titled, can take on diverse roles within community-based studies, and compensating PRAs for their input of time, skills, and expertise is considered a best practice. Making payments to people with lived experience is intended to support inclusion and the effective and equitable participation in research processes by easing financial constraints. Further, having clear policies and procedures around compensation can be helpful in clarifying expectations and responsibilities relating to people's involvement.

Developing a compensation plan with PRAs can be a complex task and many factors should be considered, such as the financial administration rules of your institution (e.g., university or non-profit organization) and of the funder. It is also crucial to consider the potential impact that receiving financial compensation may have on a PRA, including their eligibility for other forms of social assistance, such as disability benefits.

This document was developed in consultation with PRAs, research coordinators, administrative staff/financial managers at community-based organizations, and academics within British Columbia. It outlines some important considerations to take into account when developing compensation plans and policies for community-based research. Rather than being prescriptive, these tips are meant to encourage discussion on best practices and foster the formulation of guidelines tailored specifically for each context. Because each situation is different, this document is not prescriptive around rates of payment or procedures, as these will always depend on a number of variables. The key message is that every research project is unique, as are the financial realities of PRAs, and each study or project team will need to develop their own approach to compensation in consultation with the PRAs who are involved.

General Considerations

- There is no "one-size-fits-all" model. Determining how to compensate PRAs is a fluid process, which requires much thought, discussion, flexibility and time. Individual PRAs may have different concerns, and you may end up with different compensation arrangements for different people.
- People choose to participate in research teams for many different reasons – to make a contribution, to gain new skills or access to hands-on training, to connect to new people, to build community. While offering payment in the form of monetary compensation is important, other forms of acknowledgement should also be included in projects. This can include thanking and acknowledging individuals for their contributions, offering other forms of rewards, such as access to training, participation in conferences, and support in developing CVs or access to future employment.
- Receiving monetary compensation for participation in the research process may have an impact on the financial benefits that a PRA receives from other sources. These sources may include payments from provincial disability or social assistance programs, private insurance, Canada Pension Plan and housing subsidies, to name a few. Additionally, PRAs who are Aboriginal and live on reserve, or are status and are working for an organization based on band land, may also have distinct needs relating to taxation that should be considered.

- These benefit programs may have earning exceptions (monthly or annualized) or institutional guidelines that can put limits on an individual's ability to accept a salaried position or honoraria. Further, each PRA will have a unique financial, social, family and housing situation, and several factors will need to be considered in each context.

Plan from the Outset

- When conceiving of a research project that envisions a role for PRAs, develop a financial plan and policies in which you carefully analyze different issues that could arise surrounding PRA compensation. Some research projects may require strict institutional guidelines to be followed while others may allow the study to develop creative and individualized paths.
- If you are the research administrator, familiarize yourself with the financial rules and regulations of the institution that will be holding the research funds prior to discussing compensation options with PRAs. For example, if you plan on providing PRAs with cash honoraria, ensure you understand the documentation requirements of your host institution to confirm that this is indeed allowable. Additionally, the funding body (such as the Canadian Institutes of Health Research) will also have requirements that you must follow.
- It's important to develop a process that meets institutional guidelines but is responsive to the needs and context of each individual PRA or the PRA team. Follow the *Greater/Meaningful Involvement of People Living with HIV/AIDS* principles (GIPA/MIPA) and be sure to involve the people affected in discussions as early as possible.

Recruiting & Hiring PRAs

- The right time to raise financial considerations/implications is at the outset of the PRA recruitment and hiring process. Remember that some PRA applicants may have been out of the workforce for a while and may need more assistance in re-entering, including support in having conversations around the financial implications of receiving wages or honoraria.
- Ultimately, individual PRAs are responsible for determining the financial implications of accepting employment and/or honoraria. Early in the hiring process, encourage PRAs to seek information regarding the earning limitations that apply to their situation. Offer PRAs support in their search.
- When hiring PRAs, discuss the compensation offered within the position during the interview, and ask questions that encourage applicants to consider the potential tax, pension, disability benefit and other financial implications. For example, they may be receiving a pension from a private insurance company that includes limitations on how much they can earn before benefits are clawed back, or they may lose their entitlements entirely.
- Some PRAs take pride in finding employment where they can pay taxes. Do not assume that PRAs would prefer a more creative compensation arrangement. Have an open conversation about the topic.

Finding Solutions

- Creating compensation arrangements can be a time-consuming process, so budget your time accordingly.
- Reach out to colleagues and other peer research practitioners to see how they have handled financial compensation arrangements within their studies or projects.
- Develop solutions with creativity, care and tact. Be conscientious and deliberate with your choices.
- If possible, be flexible. From study to study, compensation solutions may vary. There is no one correct answer.

- You may run into barriers, make mistakes, and try different approaches until you find solutions that work for your team. This is a natural part of doing community-based research. Accept that this will be a learning process for you, your organization and PRAs.
- Although complex, working with PRAs is vastly rewarding and is worth the extra time and thought invested in research, discussion, planning and management.

Specific Considerations

- As of the time that this document was prepared, Canada Revenue requires the collection of a SIN and the issuing of a T4 or T4A if a PRA earns more than $500 annually.
- Financial requirements will vary by province. If the study includes PRAs in other parts of the country, then finding solutions to suit their financial contexts may require additional research.
- A PRA's private insurance may have criteria and limitations that are different from provincial or federal limits.
- Canada Pension Plan may place additional restrictions upon earnings. If a PRA is drawing a Canada Pension, then additional research may be necessary.
- A study which requires PRAs to handle money can require additional planning and training (record-keeping, managing money, storage, etc.) as money flowing through a PRA's bank account will likely be construed as personal income by social assistance programs (even if the funds are to be distributed to research study participants or are a reimbursement for expenses incurred).
- Government policies and entitlements change – there can even be changes over time to an individual's entitlements through private insurance plans. Such changes can affect a PRA's financial situation and the study's compensation strategies. Keep apprised of changes by following government and organizational websites as well as news media. Ensure that you have up-to-date information before you make decisions.

Examples of Financial Arrangements or Practices

- Issuing T4s and T4As as required.
- Compensating PRAs through the use of cash or gift cards.
- Balancing work schedules carefully month-by-month so as to not exceed exemption amounts.
- Travel or other expenses can be paid by the research organization to prevent the involved person being out-of-pocket and to avoid having reimbursement amounts deducted from benefit income.
- Not all individuals have access to a bank account. Pay community organizations who partner in the project by cheque who then issue cash honoraria to PRAs. This approach can work when research administration is happening in a different city from where PRAs are located.
- When PRAs themselves will be distributing honoraria to study participants, one approach (with the PRA's consent) is to contact the Ministry or social assistance provider by letter to explain that money deposited into PRAs bank accounts is for distribution to research study participants and not income.
- Deciding to employ multiple part-time positions rather than fewer full-time positions.

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Suggested PRA Checklist

- ☐ Provincial Disability – exemption amounts, monthly or annual
- ☐ Social Assistance
- ☐ Private Insurance
- ☐ Canada Pension Plan
- ☐ Private Pensions
- ☐ Housing Subsidies
- ☐ Other Kinds of social assistance

Suggested Research Coordinator/Administrator Checklist

- ☐ Government Regulations (Federal & Provincial)
- ☐ Organizational and Institutional Guidelines
- ☐ Canada Revenue Agency Standards

Helpful Resources

- BC Coalition of People with Disabilities – www.bccpd.bc.ca
- Legal Services Society – www.lss.bc.ca
- BC Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation:
    - Information for Persons with Disabilities – www.eia.gov.bc.ca/pwd.htm
    - Earnings Exemptions – www.sd.gov.bc.ca/factsheets/2006/Earnings_Exemption.htm
    - Annualized Earning Exemptions – www.sdsi.gov.bc.ca/pwd/aee/index.html
- HIV CBR Ethics Fact Sheet #1: Ethical issues related to compensation (2014) – Fact sheet authored by Adrian Guta, Sarah Flicker, Robb Travers, Sarah Switzer, Vicky Bungay, Winston Husbands, Renée Masching, Jesse Thistle, and Catherine Worthington. This informative factsheet addresses the why, how, when and who of compensation within HIV community based research, focusing primarily on research participants (i.e. focus group or survey respondents).
- HIV CBR Ethics Fact Sheet #8: Supporting Peer Research Assistants (2014) – Fact sheet authored by Adrian Guta, Sarah Flicker, Robb Travers, Sarah Switzer, Vicky Bungay, Winston Husbands, Renée Masching, Jesse Thistle, and Catherine Worthington. Four key issues are addressed in this fact sheet: the benefits of a PRA approach, training PRAs, supporting PRAs, and planning for study closure.
- Wellesley Institute Peer Research in Action Working Papers (2010) – Brenda Roche along with Sarah Flicker and Adrian Guta present Peer Research in Action in three parts: Models of Practice; Management, Support and Supervision; and, Ethical Issues.
- Payment for Involvement: A guide for making payments to members of the public actively involved in NHS, public health, and social care research (2010) – Guide published by Involve, an organization that supports greater public involvement in health research in the UK.