

# Invaluable Lessons:

## Compensating Peer Research Associates in HIV Community-Based Research

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## The Issue

In HIV community-based research (CBR), compensating people with lived experience to participate actively in the research process is a common practice. Peer research associates (PRAs) can take on diverse roles within CBR studies, and compensating PRAs for their time, skills, and expertise is critical; these types of payments are intended to support inclusion and the effective and equitable participation in research processes. Having clear compensation policies and procedures can be helpful in clarifying expectations and responsibilities relating to people's involvement, yet, few resources exist to provide guidance on developing compensation structures. This initiative sought to fill this gap.

## Our Community-Based Research Approach

Based on consultation with members of the British Columbia HIV CBR Quarterly Working Group (comprised of PRAs, research coordinators, community-based organization representatives, and academics collectively involved in numerous studies) we captured best practices and guidelines to consider when developing compensation plans for PRAs. Additionally, we collected and analyzed case examples of practices implemented within existing studies and conducted a brief review of regional social assistance earning exemption policies.

Findings were used to develop a "CBR Tips" knowledge translation document, which outlines important considerations to take into account when developing compensation procedures. "CBR Tips: Compensating Peer Researchers" has been found to be an important resource for informing compensation plans for CBR studies. Importantly though, every research project is unique, as are the financial realities of PRAs, therefore, while "CBR Tips" offers important lessons, we recommend that each study team develop their own approach to compensation in consultation with PRAs involved in the study.

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## CBR Tips

### Compensating Peer Researchers

#### General Considerations

- There is no "one-size-fits-all" model.
- Determining how to compensate PRAs is a fluid process, which requires discussion, flexibility and time. Individual PRAs may have different concerns, and you may end up with different compensation arrangements for different people.
- Receiving monetary compensation for participation in the research process may have an impact on the financial benefits an individual receives from other sources that have earning exceptions (monthly or annualized) or institutional guidelines that put limits on an individual's ability to accept a salaried position or honoraria.
- While offering payment in the form of monetary compensation is important, other forms of acknowledgement should also be considered, such as access to training or travel opportunities.

#### Plan from the outset

- When developing your research proposal carefully analyze different issues that could arise surrounding compensation and be sure to budget adequately.
- Familiarize yourself with the financial rules and regulations of your host institution prior to discussing compensation options PRAs.
- Follow the Greater/Meaningful Involvement of People Living with HIV/AIDS principles and be sure to involve the people affected in discussions as early as possible.

#### Peer Researchers at the Centre

- Remember that some applicants may have been out of the workforce for a while and need more assistance.
- Individual PRAs are ultimately responsible for determining the financial implications of accepting employment and/or honoraria. Encourage PRAs to seek information on earning limitations and offer support.

- Peer mentors can play an important role in supporting new PRAs.
- Some peers take pride in finding employment where they can pay taxes. Do not assume that PRAs would prefer a more creative compensation arrangement.

#### Examples of Financial Arrangements or Practices for Cases where Earning Limits are a Concern

- Issue T4s and T4As as required.
- Compensate PRAs through the use of cash or gift cards.
- Balance work schedules carefully month-by-month so as to not exceed exemption amounts.
- Employ multiple part-time positions rather than full-time positions.
- Travel or other expenses can be paid by the research organization to prevent the PRA being out-of-pocket and to avoid having reimbursement amounts deducted from benefit income.
- Not all individuals have bank accounts. 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 social assistance provider by letter to explain that money deposited into PRAs bank accounts is for distribution to research study participants and not income.

#### Lessons Learned

- Creating compensation arrangements can be a time-consuming process; budget your time accordingly.
- Reach out to colleagues and other peer research practitioners to learn from financial compensation practices within their studies or projects.
- Develop solutions with creativity, care and tact. Be conscientious and deliberate with your choices.
- You may run into barriers, make mistakes, and try different approaches until you find solutions that work for your team. Accept that this will be a learning process for all team members!

## Download the CBR Tips resource

[www.pacificaidnetwork.org/resources/cbr/cbr-toolkitresources/peer-researchers](http://www.pacificaidnetwork.org/resources/cbr/cbr-toolkitresources/peer-researchers)