

# SPOTLIGHT: New Mexico Peer Education Project



## Background

Over 40 percent of individuals entering the state prison system in New Mexico test positive for the hepatitis C (HCV) antibody and many are at risk of exposure to HCV while incarcerated. In 2009, Project ECHO's Dr. Karla Thornton decided to change this trend with the launch of New Mexico Peer Education Project: Prisoner Health is Community Health (NMPEP). Modeled after Wall Talk, a successful Texas-based peer education project focusing on HIV, NMPEP trains incarcerated individuals to educate their peers on health issues such as HCV, HIV and addiction.

## How It Works

To become a peer educator, individuals must have at least one year left in their sentence and have at least six months of clear conduct. Many participants are picked by existing peer educators and staff based on demonstrated positive leadership skills. After receiving approval from the warden, the peer educator completes a 40-hour training course taught by NMPEP staff and community faculty members, who are previously trained peer educators now in the community and hired by Project ECHO.

During training, peer educators learn about infectious diseases, substance use disorders, harm reduction, and basic health literacy. Additionally, they learn training and communication skills such as presentation development and public speaking. Through Project ECHO's videoconferencing technology, peer educators at nine participating prisons meet monthly to continue learning through case based presentations and council together about best practices. Peer educators facilitate all sessions. Upon release, peer educators may receive community health-worker certifications through Project ECHO. Upon reentry, Project ECHO also provides a letter of support for peer educators and assists them with job searches.

## How It Is Innovative

Prisoner health is community health. In the United States, 95 percent of incarcerated individuals are released back into their communities.<sup>1</sup> Providing health education to

"This program gives incarcerated individuals hope. Hope is a very powerful thing. These individuals are finding their purpose in life. They stop using drugs. They gain confidence and they share important knowledge with fellow incarcerated peers and the community."

– Saul Hernandez, Program Manager

inmates before they are released from prison offers an opportunity to reduce the harms of substance use and other unhealthy behaviors in the community and provides peer educators with skills that can be used in their careers. Project ECHO values "demonopolizing" knowledge and does not charge for their curriculum and technology. Therefore, NMPEP is a low-cost way to do high volume education for an underserved and oftentimes, disenfranchised population.

## Demonstrating Success

To date, the New Mexico Peer Education Project has certified over 500 peer educators and reached almost 11,000 inmates through classes and mentorship. The New Mexico Peer Education Project will soon be in all of the prisons in New Mexico and will replicate in Indiana and Tennessee.

Knowledge questionnaires are administered before and after classes led by peer educators. Questionnaire results consistently show knowledge gained through classes. Correctional staff at participating prisons report increased positive interactions with inmates in the program. Peer educators report an increase in hope and family members notice positive changes in their loved ones. The program not only gives inmates important health knowledge, but also provides them with professional skills to use after release. After release, many continue to volunteer with NMPEP.

**Spotlight Series:** *A series to highlight innovative programs across the country that contribute to a comprehensive strategy to address addiction.*

## The Future of the New Mexico Peer Education Project

New Mexico House Bill 370, recently signed into law, allows for individuals leaving incarceration diagnosed with a substance use disorder to be issued naloxone. Peer educators will provide harm reduction education to these individuals. NMPEP is also working on providing additional community supports for peer educators upon leaving incarceration.

### Stakeholders & Partners

The New Mexico Peer Education Project is a collaboration between Project ECHO and the New Mexico Department of Corrections. Project ECHO is a telementoring hub and spoke model that connects practitioners in rural and underserved areas to specialists. The New Mexico Department of Corrections operates twelve correctional facilities in the state.

### Resources

Project ECHO Website: <https://echo.unm.edu/>

<sup>1</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics. (n.d.). Releases from state prison. Retrieved from <https://www.bjs.gov/content/reentry/releases.cfm#number>