

## FAITH-BASED HIV PREVENTION FOR YOUNG AFRICAN AMERICAN MSM

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### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Unity Fellowship Church Movement (UFCM) and CAPS are collaborating to develop an innovative HIV prevention approach, positioned within a faith-based organization. It will mobilize young Black men who have sex with men (YBMSM) ages 18-29 to reach into the Black community to encourage their peers to have safer sex, obtain HIV testing when needed and, for their HIV+ peers, to access appropriate medical treatment and social support. This project will build on our previous CHRP-funded work focusing on developing a community-level prevention model for use in Black AIDS service organizations. We will assess the capacity, interest and attitudes of certain Black churches towards HIV prevention by conducting semi-structured telephone interviews with representatives of select Black churches in California. Additionally, we will conduct six focus groups with YBMSM: two groups with YBMSM who do not attend church to discuss their attitudes towards churches running HIV prevention programs, two groups with HIV- or unknown HIV status YBMSM to discuss their opinions and experiences regarding HIV testing and the role that church-based interventions could play in encouraging testing, and two groups with HIV+ YBMSM to discuss issues related to HIV treatment and support for positive people, particularly through church-based interventions. Finally, UFCM and CAPS will recruit community experts and consultants to form two Boards of Cultural Experts, who will collaborate with the research team to develop the foundations for an HIV prevention intervention for Black faith-based organizations.

### SIGNIFICANCE

YBMSM are at extremely high risk for HIV both in California and throughout the US. Our previous research indicated that religion and spirituality are very important in the lives of YBMSM—most were raised in the church and many remain connected to it—yet few HIV prevention interventions have incorporated faith-based approaches into their prevention strategies.

### INTERESTING FINDINGS

We conducted 6 focus groups in Los Angeles with 38 18-29 year old YBMSM, with diverse SES. Men were recruited from church-based events, a community-based organization, at HIV treatment clinics and via the Internet. Topics included church involvement, spirituality, HIV testing and treatment and HIV prevention programs. The issue of gossip among YBMSM and in the Black community regarding men's serostatus arose across focus groups. Men described concerns about accessing testing and treatment due to potential gossip within the Black gay community and larger Black community. Men explained this also affected disclosure of positive serostatus to sex partners, because they might tell others of one's serostatus. The need for hope and belief in medications' effectiveness and spirituality, faith, and the belief that God had provided testing and treatment facilitated obtaining testing and treatment. However, many YBMSM felt their churches had declared them sinners who deserved to contract HIV, which impacted their sense of self-worth and interfered with getting tested and obtaining treatment. Yet, some men had found churches that accepted and supported them as gay, and in some cases as HIV+ men. Many men discussed the need to be mentally healthy in order to obtain testing and treatment, and this was related to frustration that many other more basic needs are ignored with the exclusive focus on HIV/AIDS. To encourage testing and treatment, men recommended that: YBMSM, and particularly HIV+ men, should support their friends to seek HIV-related services; there should be support groups for YBMSM; and various mass media approaches should, in YBMSM's own words, be used to promote the importance and availability of testing and treatment, but featuring typical YBMSM rather than public figures. YBMSM need hope, information, and support from the Black gay community, the larger Black community, and the church. (excerpted from "*Young Black MSM's Concerns about HIV Testing and Obtaining Treatment: The Importance of Hope, Support, and Faith.*" Presented at the National HIV Prevention Conference, Dec 2007)

**PROJECT END DATE:** Fall/Winter 2007