

CALIFORNIAMEN.NET:

Web-Based, Structural HIV Prevention in MSM's Networks

PI: Deb Levine

CO-PI: Greg Rebchook PhD

CO-I: Jeffrey Klausner

PROJECT STAFF: Alberto Curotto, Project Director

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This project developed and is currently piloting a multicomponent structural intervention website to evaluate new ways to prevent HIV among MSM who use the Internet. The study, funded by a grant from the Universitywide AIDS Research Program, is a collaboration between CAPS researchers, the San Francisco-based non-profit Internet Sexuality Information Services, Inc. (ISIS), and the San Francisco Department of Public Health. Until now, most programs have targeted individual behaviors; while such efforts play an important role in HIV prevention, environmental and structural-level interventions may have a greater potential to change the social climate where risk behaviors take place and, by affecting community norms, reach a larger population than the individuals directly participating in the program. This study is particularly important in that it aims to build on the successes of existing web-based STD/HIV-prevention programs by consolidating their experiences and expanding the focus beyond the individual level.

We conducted focus groups with diverse gay/bisexual men from around California including San Jose, Orange County, Los Angeles and Modesto. Many participants reported that they couldn't find the community they wanted in bars, clubs or current online venues. In response, we developed a website where they can take a break from cruising and get to know other gay/bisexual men away from the sexually-charged environment online. We created a pilot website, CaliforniaMen.net, to offer gay and bi men "cruise control for your online life." Based on our formative research, we designed this site to bring HIV prevention into the Web 2.0 age. Most public health sites are static information sources. CaliforniaMen.net empowers men to speak in their own voices about their experiences, without judgment or censorship. CaliforniaMen.net allows men to share experiences of being gay men in California, post reviews of online cruising sites and organize information about their sex lives. These features are designed to encourage critical reflection of their sexual activities and online environments, create the possibility for open and meaningful online communication, and for visitors to come together online as a community by engaging in an ongoing discussion about issues that are relevant to their lives and health as gay/bisexual men.

We have recruited four bloggers from around the state. One was diagnosed HIV+ within days before he started blogging. He felt that sharing his real life experiences would help other men learn that HIV is no party. An excerpt from his first blog entry reads, "I am now positive. I am the same person. And yet everything I'd need to think about was drastically and cataclysmically changed."

A little black book is available so men can keep track of their sex lives. Before opening their personal book, men enter information about their "comfort zone" in terms of sexual risk-taking activities. As they add contacts into the book, their actual sexual experiences are compared to their comfort zone. Email STD and HIV testing reminders are integrated into this experience.

To evaluate the site, we are recruiting men from CaliforniaMen.net to discuss their experiences with the site and explain how it may have changed their awareness of HIV or their sexual risk-taking behaviors. We are also collecting website usage statistics to summarize how the different components are used, and we will be conducting a thematic analysis of topics discussed online.

PROJECT WEBSITE: californiamen.net

PROJECT END DATE: December 31, 2007