

# The Mpowerment Project: Community-Building With Young Gay and Bisexual Men to Prevent HIV<sup>1</sup>

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The Mpowerment Project is a community-level HIV prevention intervention for young gay and bisexual men ages 18–27. The program seeks to build a strong, supportive young gay and bisexual men's community where young gay and bisexual men nurture and protect each other, particularly with regard to HIV prevention. The program's theoretical framework draws from the areas of diffusion of innovations, community organizing, peer influence, and personal empowerment. The Mpowerment Project promotes a norm for safer sex through a variety of social, outreach and small group activities. The project is run by a "Core Group" of 12–15 young gay and bisexual men who, with volunteers, design and carry out all project activities. Implemented in 4 communities (Eugene, OR; Santa Barbara, CA; Albuquerque, NM; Austin, TX), the Mpowerment Project has proven to be effective in reducing high risk sex. This paper discusses the development and implementation of the program and various challenges encountered.

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Young gay and bisexual men are engaging in high levels of unsafe sex (DeWit, 1996; Hays, Kegeles, & Coates, 1990b; Mansergh & Marks, 1998; Strathdee et al., 1998) and becoming infected with HIV at alarming rates (Dean & Meyer, 1995; Lemp et al., 1994; Valleroy et al., 2000). A household probability sample of 18- to 29-year-old gay and bisexual men in San Francisco found 18% to be HIV-positive, with an estimated 2.6% annual incidence (Osmond et al., 1994). At this rate, by the time today's young gay and bisexual men reach middle age, 50% will have HIV (Hoover et al., 1991)—which is no different from what

happened to the previous generation of gay men. It is terribly frustrating and tragic to think that after this many years into the epidemic we have not suffered enough, learned enough, or perhaps do not care enough to protect our new generations of gay and bisexual men from the ravages of AIDS.

Community Psychologists recognize that an individual's behavior does not occur in isolation (Levine & Perkins, 1997; Rappaport, 1977). In examining the context of young gay/bisexual men's sexual risk-taking, the enormous challenges they confront in their daily lives are evident. Young gay/bisexual men constantly must face ostracism by their peers; rejection by family and social institutions like the Boy Scouts and military; threats of gay-bashing and verbal assault; and constant derogatory portrayals in the media. School curricula ignore their needs and public health campaigns that appear to "promote homosexuality" are squashed. Young gay/bisexual men have little support for being themselves, and few settings that nurture healthy behavior or connect them to peers in a supportive, health-promoting climate. As a consequence, many young gay/bisexual men

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<sup>1</sup>For more detailed information about the Mpowerment Project and guidance in how to implement it, we have created the "Mpowerment Project Replication Manual" which is available by contacting Greg Rebchook, Ph.D. at (415) 597-4951 or grebchook@psg.ucsf.edu.

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experience high psychological distress, low self-esteem, and have high rates of attempted suicide (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Remafedi, 1998, 1999). Young gay/bisexual men yearn for a place where they can fit in, be themselves, draw support from others, and feel a sense of community. The Mpowerment Project is an HIV prevention program for young gay/bisexual men that uses a community-building model to simultaneously address many of these urgent issues (Kegeles, Hays, & Coates, 1996; Kegeles, Hays, Pollack, & Coates, 1999). In this paper, we discuss the history of the Mpowerment Project, its theoretical basis and operation, and lessons learned in implementing the program.

### **HISTORY OF THE MPOWERMENT PROJECT**

The design of the Mpowerment Project was guided by the authors' previous research and an extensive process of formative research, including social marketing research, focus groups with young gay/bisexual men, and interviews with key informants, such as people working in HIV prevention with gay/bisexual men and leaders in the local gay/bisexual community. We pilot-tested the Mpowerment Project in Santa Cruz, CA, revised it extensively, and then implemented it in four communities (i.e., Eugene, OR; Santa Barbara, CA; Albuquerque, NM; Austin, TX). Several other communities have implemented it on their own with technical assistance from us (e.g., Phoenix, AZ; South Beach, FL; Honolulu, HI). Rigorous controlled studies showed that the Mpowerment Project successfully reduced rates of unprotected anal intercourse in Eugene and Santa Barbara (it is still being evaluated in the other two communities). For detailed descriptions of the evaluations, see Kegeles et al., 1996 and Kegeles et al., 1999. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has declared the Mpowerment Project one of the model HIV prevention programs in the country (CDC; 1999).

### **FEATURES OF THE MPOWERMENT PROJECT**

The Mpowerment Project has a number of distinguishing features that embody many of the principles of community psychology. These are described below.

#### **Community-Level**

Since all young gay/bisexual men need to receive HIV prevention, the Mpowerment Project is a

community-level intervention. Compared with individual or small group approaches, community-level approaches can reach large numbers of men quickly and have been successfully used in dealing with a variety of health issues (Bracht, 1990; Latzer & Shatz, 1999; Schensul, 1998; Taylor et al., 1998), including HIV (Kelly et al., 1997). One advantage of community-level approaches is that the targeted individuals do not have to personally recognize that they are at risk and seek services in order to benefit from the intervention.

#### **Social Focus**

In the focus groups we conducted with young gay/bisexual men, it became clear that AIDS prevention was not in itself sufficiently motivating or captivating for them. Many young men perceived AIDS to be a problem mainly of older gay men; therefore, many felt it was safe to have unprotected sex with other young men. The prolonged incubation period of HIV infection contributes to this misperception since men who become infected in their early twenties are not likely to show symptoms until much later. Further, with the advances in HIV treatments, young men are less likely to see peers with HIV symptoms. Therefore, young gay/bisexual men may perceive HIV to be less serious than did the preceding generations of men who were confronted with the devastations of AIDS in a more direct, personal way. Further, as described earlier, HIV is only one threat among many that young gay/bisexual men confront in a homophobic society where gay-bashing, discrimination, and battles over gay rights are commonplace; and young men may be dealing simultaneously with issues of self-esteem, alienation, family problems, and so forth. Successful HIV prevention interventions for young gay/bisexual men therefore need to tie HIV risk reduction to the satisfaction of other needs, such as the development of one's social network, enjoyable social interactions, and enhanced self-esteem. Through the focus groups, it became clear that social concerns (i.e., how to meet and have fun with other young gay/bisexual men) were highly motivating for them. Thus a social focus became the central theme of the project.

#### **Community Building**

A primary goal of the Mpowerment Project is to create healthy friendship and social support networks. Young gay/bisexual men report significant isolation

and a lack of support for being gay (Martin & Hetrick, 1988; Savin-Williams, 1994). They desire a sense of connection and belonging with people “like them.” Yet there are very few settings in most communities where young gay/bisexual men can meet and socialize. Further, the young gay/bisexual men’s community is often not personally supportive, and can actually promote risk-taking behaviors. Bars and public cruising settings are typically the main settings available for young gay/bisexual men to meet and socialize. Yet each is highly sex-charged, and the bar scene’s emphasis on alcohol and drugs sets the stage for engaging in sex while high, consistently found to contribute to unsafe sex (Kelly & Kalichman, 1995; Ostrow, 1994; Stall, McKusick, Wiley, & Coates, 1986). In our Young Men’s Survey (Hays et al., 1990b), we found that men who were more involved in the gay community actually showed more sexual risk-taking than less involved men. Further, the range and quality of interactions among men in bar and cruising settings, based heavily on superficial appearances and casual encounters, may not provide the depth of communication, meaningful connection, and opportunities for personal validation that many young men crave. In addition, we have observed that young gay/bisexual men often fall into a pattern of being critical and disparaging with each other, perhaps because of unresolved coming-out issues, internalized homophobia, and lack of supportive gay role models. For these reasons, simply connecting young gay/bisexual men to each other is not necessarily health-promoting.

In order to build a strong, healthy gay/bisexual young men’s community, it is necessary to provide positive settings and foster norms that promote mutual caring and positive individual growth. We try to stimulate project participants to be more self-conscious of how they treat each other and to interact with each other in mutually respectful, supportive ways that embody caring and serve to enhance each other’s self-esteem. The Mpowerment Project creates settings where young gay/bisexual men can express their identities, form positive linkages with similar others, draw support, and band together to take action on issues of importance to them—characteristics of health-promoting communities espoused by many community psychologists (Kelly, 1988; Minkler, 1985, 1990).

### **Peer-Based**

The Mpowerment Project relies on peers as change agents since peers exert tremendous influ-

ence at this stage of life (Dickens & Perlman, 1981; DiClemente, 1992) and have been shown to be the most credible and influential sources of information (Cialdini, 1993; Frederikson et al., 1984; Geller et al., 1985; Rosen & Solomon, 1985). Research with gay/bisexual men of all ages has shown that perceptions of peer norms about sexual behavior are strongly associated with one’s own sexual behavior (Emmons et al., 1986; Fishbein et al., 1993; Hays et al., 1990a; Herek & Glunt, 1995; Kelly et al., 1995). Therefore, the Mpowerment Project attempts to mobilize young men to support and encourage their peers about having safer sex. In addition, the program is peer-based in having young men design many aspects of the intervention because young men know best what is appealing to other young men.

### **Empowerment Philosophy**

The Mpowerment Project is designed to serve an empowering function within the young gay/bisexual men’s community. When individuals are actively involved in finding and implementing solutions to their problems, their behavior-change is more lasting (Gonzales, Hays, Bond, & Kelly, 1983; Rappaport, 1981). Thus, providing young men a mechanism for designing and running the intervention activities is most likely to foster a sense of personal commitment to HIV prevention among the young men and a sense of ownership of the prevention activities.

### **Diffusion of Innovations**

The Mpowerment Project’s design draws from the theory of diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 1995), which posits that members of a social system are most likely to adopt a new behavioral practice (e.g., safer sex) based on favorable evaluations of the innovation conveyed to them by similar, respected others. Community change comes about through a process of informal communication and modeling by peers within their interpersonal networks. The Mpowerment Project thus seeks to develop a process by which young men actively communicate with each other about and encourage each other to practice safer sex so that safer sex becomes the mutually accepted norm.

### **Gay-Positive/Sex-Positive**

Several commentators (Odets, 1994; Rofes, 1998) have criticized HIV prevention programs for gay/bisexual men as being repressive and sex-negative

in that they serve to make men feel shameful of their sexual behaviors or treat their sexual activities as if they have no personal and cultural meaning. In contrast, our program attempts to enrich and strengthen young gay/bisexual men's pride and nurture their exploration and celebration of their sexuality, focusing not just on condom use but including the variety of sexual activities that are safe. All of the materials produced by the project show positive, diverse images of gay/bisexual men. Likewise, safer-sex-promotional outreach activities and materials are designed to be uplifting, fun, and erotic; fear- and shame-inducing approaches are avoided. The safer-sex-promotional materials tend to be attractive and graphic, to get young men's attention and increase the likelihood they will keep, and ideally display the material at home.

### **Multi-Leveled Approach**

Self-esteem, interpersonal and cultural issues, homophobia, substance use, and many other factors all influence young men's risk behavior (Hays et al., 1990b; Kegeles et al., 1999). Since young gay/bisexual men engage in unsafe sex for a variety of reasons, interventions that focus solely on one level of factors will miss men who engage in unsafe sex for other reasons. The various components of the Mpowerment Project thus try to address the variety of contributors. For example, the format of the safer-sex outreach performances and materials change over the course of the intervention so that a wide variety of variables can be targeted.

### **STRUCTURE OF THE MPOWERMENT PROJECT**

The Mpowerment Project's operating structure includes several project coordinators, a Core Group decision-making body, volunteers, a Community Advisory Board, and a community center, described in the following.

#### **Core Group**

In keeping with the empowerment philosophy, we hire 2–4 young gay/bisexual men to coordinate the program. They assemble a Core Group of 15–20 diverse young men who represent the various segments of young gay/bisexual men in the community. The

Core Group designs and carries out, with other volunteers, all of the project's activities. It is hoped that through active involvement in designing and carrying out the project activities, participants will develop a sense of ownership of the project and the project's goals. The Core Group is empowered to make most of the major decisions for the project, including choosing the name and image of the project, designing the outreach and social events, and monitoring and setting the direction for the project at a "big picture" level. Core Group meetings occur weekly, and usually begin with a fun icebreaker exercise to introduce new members and guests, followed by progress reports and discussions of current project activities. Following the meeting, everyone is encouraged to stay and socialize. Light refreshments are served. Much of the actual project work (e.g., planning details of events) is done in committee meetings during the week.

#### **Volunteers**

The Mpowerment Project relies heavily on volunteers. Since all project participants do not have the interest or time to be Core Group members, we try to provide opportunities for every young man who wants to be involved in the project to do so in some way. For example, one young man in Albuquerque did not enjoy the detailed discussions of the Core Group, but enjoyed organizing Sunday volleyball games. Every young man who comes to a project activity is personally welcomed by a project member and asked to complete an Interest Sheet, that lists ways in which they can volunteer with the project. The coordinators match volunteers with project committees and tasks. In this way, new volunteers are continually drawn into the project.

#### **Community Advisory Board**

The Core Group is assisted by a Community Advisory Board of interested men and women from the HIV, lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT), public health, business, and university communities, who meet monthly with the Core Group to give ideas and advice. The Board members share their expertise and contribute their resources, connections, and historical perspectives to support project efforts. They engage the Core Group in dialogue to help guide them, but in no way "tell them what to do." Board members also provide a link between the project and their respective

organizations and guidance in generating funding for the project. As “community elders,” the Board members also provide positive role models for the young men and provide a valuable intergenerational link between the project and the broader community; this is important so that the project is not seen as separatist or promoting “ageism” within the community.

### Community Center

Ideally, the project has its own physical space that serves both as the headquarters and as a community center for young gay/bisexual men. Project volunteers decorate the center. The center includes information and referrals to other community organizations and services. Safer sex materials (i.e., condoms, lubes, information) are available. Gay-positive and sex-positive posters promoting safer sex are hung on the walls to remind men of the norms for safer sex and to promote community-building. Although the interior of the center is comfortable, “homey,” and gay-positive, the exterior is very discreet, containing nothing that identifies the project as a gay or HIV-related organization. This helps young men feel comfortable being seen entering the building and avoids attracting the attention of homophobic individuals who may be prone to vandalize the building or “gay-bash” the men who come there.

## COMPONENTS OF THE MPOWERMENT PROJECT

The Mpowerment Project includes four main components: (1) formal peer outreach, (2) small group sessions called M-Groups, (3) informal peer outreach, and (4) an ongoing publicity campaign. Each component is essential—working synergistically to make an effective program (Kegeles, Hays, Waldo, & Pollack, 1996).

### Formal Outreach

Formal outreach includes two types of activities: outreach team performances and outreach events. The outreach team involves groups of young men who go to settings frequented by young gay/bisexual men to promote safer sex. This includes outreach at bars, cafes, and at community events. For example, as a take-off on the television program “Baywatch,” the Albuquerque team staged a “Gaywatch” bar out-

reach in which they dressed as lifeguards and attracted the crowd’s attention by blowing lifeguard whistles, bouncing beach balls around the bar, and dancing together on the bar’s stage. They then handed out specially designed beach-themed safer sex materials. For a September “Back to School” bar outreach, they wore costumes representing different college stereotypes such as a football jock, a professor, a cheerleader, a nerd, and a graduate in a cap and gown. They distributed what looked like a student’s notebook that contained descriptions of various safer sex “electives.” To ring in the year 2000, the Austin team conducted a “Y2Gay” outreach. Dressed in futuristic costumes of black and silver with fluorescent glow sticks and carrying plastic ray guns, they gave out safer sex kits titled “The Future of Safer Sex” with provocative images of erotic, safer sexual behaviors for the new millennium.

Since most communities typically have few settings where young gay/bisexual men congregate and socialize, a major aspect of the Mpowerment Project’s formal outreach is the creation of new social events to attract young gay/bisexual men, at which safer sex can be promoted. Formal outreach has included large events such as dances, house parties, community forums, picnics, art shows, pool parties, fashion shows, and sports events that attracted 70–200 people; and smaller events such as weekly video parties, discussion groups, sports activities, scavenger hunts, and field trips to local attractions. For example, in Albuquerque, Monday Night Coffee-Talk was very popular, where men could drop in and talk about whatever the group decided that night. The Austin project hosted a very successful “Oscar Party” to watch the Academy Awards. The project makes special effort to sponsor a wide variety of events that appeal to various segments of the young gay/bisexual men’s community, particularly men of color.

While Mpowerment events are designed primarily to be fun social events and are advertised as such, each event is also infused with safer-sex-promotional activities and safer sex materials are distributed. For example, at parties and other larger events, the outreach team may perform a theatrical performance piece to motivate young men about safer sex and generate interest in becoming involved with the project, in a fun and entertaining manner. For example, the Eugene project held a large dance party called Club M in a local warehouse space that attracted over 200 men. At the peak of the party, the outreach team presented a stage show featuring “Condom Miranda,” an outreach team member in drag who performed a tropical stage show number which culminated in her

introduction of the “Condom Men,” outreach team members who were dressed in costume to personify various condoms (i.e., Greek warrior for Trojan, geisha boy for Kimono, pirate for Gold Coin, etc.). Condom Miranda humorously interviewed each Condom Man about the merits of his condom. Then the Condom Men circulated among the crowd handing out their brand of condoms. Albuquerque held a “Viva Las Vegas” party in which they transformed their center into a Las Vegas-style casino with drag queen showgirls (Core Group members) who distributed safer sex packets from their cigarette trays. At Austin’s fashion show, the models displayed placards with various safer sex messages throughout the show and then the outreach team, dressed as the “Fashion Police” circulated through the crowd and handed out “fashion tips,” which included safer sex ideas and condoms.

Interactive methods are often used with men attending events to promote safer sex. For example, at Holiday Party in Albuquerque men were asked to write their favorite safer sex activity on cutout ornaments to hang on a Christmas tree. At Austin’s homecoming dance, participants played a gay version of “Singled Out” (based on the MTV game show), which included safer sex questions. HIV prevention is infused into smaller events as well. For example, at video parties a safer sex video may be shown during intermission. In discussion groups, safer sex themes can be easily incorporated. The materials distributed at the events include safer sex information, condoms, graphic images designed to give ideas for eroticizing low risk activities, and invitations to Mpowerment activities. The young men design all of the outreach materials, using their natural language and explicit, erotic images.

### **M-Groups**

Small group sessions, called “M-groups,” are the second major component of the project. The M-groups are peer-led, one-time meetings of 8–10 young gay/bisexual men that last 2–3 h. Our preliminary research identified the following factors that contributed to unsafe sex among young gay/bisexual men, and these variables were selected to target through the M-group: clarifying misconceptions about safer sex, increasing the enjoyment of safer sex, building communication skills for negotiating safer sex, and addressing interpersonal issues that may interfere with safer sex (Hays et al., 1990b). Since it was recognized

that not all high-risk-taking men were likely to attend M-groups, the M-groups also provide training in how the participants might talk informally with their friends outside the group to encourage them to practice safer sex. The format of the M-group was developed through a series of focus groups with young gay/bisexual men and designed to be fun and interactive, including structured exercises, informal discussion and role-plays. Importantly, M-groups are never referred to as “safer sex workshops,” which would immediately alienate many young men. Rather, they are promoted as a fun way for young gay/bisexual men to meet other young men, find out about the project, and hear how other men are dealing with issues of importance to them, such as sex, dating, and relationships. All men who are interested in being involved with the Mpowerment Project are encouraged to attend an M-group as a type of “entry” into the project.

### **Informal Outreach**

Informal outreach consists of project participants talking with their friends in casual conversations about the need to engage in safer sex. Young men learn how to conduct informal outreach in the final section of the M-group, which is intended to motivate and train participants to encourage their friends to have safer sex. The facilitators introduce the topic by stating the importance of encouraging their friends to engage in safer sex, emphasizing the fact that the gay/bisexual community is being attacked from all angles (e.g., the Religious Right, AIDS, conservative politicians, etc.) and that no one is going to “jump out” to help us—“it’s really up to us as gay/bisexual men to defend ourselves and fight off all these threats.” Then the group discusses specific ways to nurture and support their friends’ safer sexual behavior. Next, participants role-play scenarios that give opportunities to practice encouraging friends. The facilitators ask the participants each to make a commitment to invite several of their friends to an M-group and provide them with safer sex packages to give to their friends. Participants receive buttons or other items with the Mpowerment Project logo (for example, in Austin lanyard key chains with “AMP” on them for Austin Men’s Project were distributed), which they are asked to wear to show their support for the project. It is hoped that wearing these items might also trigger conversations about the project and serve as a reminder for young men about the norm for safer sex that the project seeks to establish. The process of conducting informal

outreach with peers about safer sex promotes the community-building aspect of this project and lays the foundation for establishing a norm for mutual caring and supportiveness within that growing community.

### Publicity

The fourth component of the Mpowerment Project is an ongoing publicity campaign that includes articles and advertisements in the gay newspapers, posters and fliers in settings frequented by young gay/bisexual men, a project website, e-mails to interested men, and “word of mouth.” The publicity campaign is intended to establish an awareness and legitimacy of the program, invite young men to become involved, and provide a continual reminder of the norm for safer sex within the young gay/bisexual men’s community. The program is not advertised via mainstream publicity channels (e.g., local newspaper, radio, television, etc.) because it is felt that if the project becomes known within the general community as a program for young gay/bisexual men, young men who are not comfortable being associated with a publicly gay-identified organization may be reluctant to become involved. In addition, keeping a low profile within the mainstream community is important in that it avoids arousing homophobic individuals in the heterosexual community who may view the project as “promoting homosexuality” and attempt to destroy it.

## THE PROCESS OF THE MPOWERMENT PROJECT

### Hiring Coordinators

The first step in implementing the Mpowerment Project is to hire the project coordinators. One crucial lesson we learned in our pilot community is that one individual cannot coordinate the entire project single-handedly. We feel the absolute minimum staffing is two half-time coordinators. Given the complexity of the project, a single individual is unlikely to be able to focus on all of the program components simultaneously and have the expertise to tackle each of the job duties. Second, the coordinators’ role can be quite demanding. Being able to function as a team with fellow coordinators can provide helpful opportunities for problem-solving and social support in confronting the many challenges of the program. Third, as a community-building program, it is valuable for the

coordinators to represent different social networks, which is not possible with a single coordinator. The coordinators are the starting points for the diffusion process, so being able to tap into different networks from the start can greatly accelerate diffusion of safer sex norms.

### Community Assessment

Gaining a solid understanding of the community is an essential step to successful community building. As one of their first tasks, the project coordinators conduct a community assessment. Coordinators should work like ethnographers, interviewing both key opinion leaders as well as a cross-section of “average” young gay/bisexual men, and visiting the various settings frequented by young men as “participant observers.” A main goal of the community assessment is to identify the various segments of young gay/bisexual men who comprise the community. Other important aspects of the community to delineate are the influential people and organizations that are relevant to young gay/bisexual men, existing HIV prevention efforts in the area, community resources that the intervention can draw upon (e.g., popular cafes, community centers), and communication channels for young gay/bisexual men (e.g., gay newspapers and periodicals, gay-oriented radio programs).

### Community Organizing

Drawing upon the assessment findings, the coordinators assemble the Core Group made up of 15–20 key opinion leaders from the various segments of young gay/bisexual men they identified. Thus the composition of the Core Group will reflect the target population of the community. The Core Group process draws on the community-organizing approaches of Freire (1973, 1974) and Alinsky (1989). During initial meetings, the Core Group is asked to reflect on the current situation for young gay/bisexual men in their community and to visualize ways they would ideally like it to be. We typically show the Mpowerment Project Overview Video (from our Replication Package) to present the philosophy and framework of the program. The group then brainstorms goals they see for the project, followed by activities the project might do to help achieve those goals. At later meetings, they select their first event (typically a project kickoff/open-house event), set their

goals for the event and begin planning it. For example, Albuquerque chose “We are Family” as the theme of their kick-off event, which was a Sunday afternoon open house/picnic at their center. Following each event, the Core Group reflects on the degree to which they achieved their goals, lessons learned, and ways to improve future events. Through this process of self-reflection or “critical consciousness” (Freire, 1973) and achievement of winnable goals (Alinsky, 1989), we hope the project will instill in participants a sense of personal and collective empowerment that will carry over to other aspects of their lives (e.g., managing their personal and sexual relationships, confronting societal challenges, etc.).

Over the course of the program, the Core Group continually reflects upon whether they are achieving the project goals of community building and HIV prevention, and in particular, whether they are reaching all the various segments of young men in the community. When areas for improvement or new directions for the project are identified, they brainstorm ways to address them and enact those solutions. In this way, the project is continuously evolving and can adapt to changing needs and interests of the community. The composition of the Core Group changes over time as new members join and veteran members move on to other pursuits. This is a normal and expected process, and keeps the Core Group fresh and dynamic.

### **Linking With Other Organizations**

The project attempts to cultivate mutually supportive relationships with organizations and service providers in the area relevant to young gay/bisexual men. During the community-assessment phase, it is helpful for the coordinators to meet with representatives from the various relevant organizations to introduce the project and discuss ways in which they can complement and support each other. At this time, the coordinators can invite particular individuals to be on the Community Advisory Board, which will provide a link between their organization and the project. Relationships with the bar owners and managers can be particularly challenging, but are essential to cultivate given the importance of conducting outreach at the bars. Typically bar owners are concerned that the outreach events will be a “downer” for their customers, leave a mess (i.e., condoms and pamphlets strewn on the floor), discourage alcohol sales, and create events that compete with their business. We have found it helpful for the outreach coordinator to meet personally with the bar owner or manager at the outset of

the project to inform him/her about the project and discuss how they can work together. In addition, the project space provides lists of referrals for HIV testing, health care, gay-friendly therapists, rental listings, and other services. Likewise, information about the Mpowerment Project and promotional materials are placed in organizations that young gay/bisexual men might visit. In this way, the project has reciprocal relationships with community organizations, wherein our project refers men to them and they refer men to us.

### **Tailoring Project to Community**

The Mpowerment Project is intended to be tailored to the unique culture and social environment of whatever community implements it. What appeals to young men in one community may not attract men in another community since different issues and values may be salient in different communities. For example, when the project was implemented in Eugene, OR, there was a major political issue brewing—the Radical Right was attempting to pass a state law eliminating legislation forbidding discrimination against gay men and lesbians in areas such as housing and jobs. Thus, many young men saw a link among the various external threats to the gay community and HIV, which instilled the project with a more activist tone than in the other communities. Similarly, the cultural background in Albuquerque influenced the tone of the program in that community. The first non-Native Americans to arrive in the region were Spaniards rather than Anglos, and the community continues to be very Hispanic in flavor. A great deal of emphasis is placed on the importance of family in Hispanic culture (Diaz, 1997), and the project promoted itself as a place to “come home” and to be “with family,” and it was reluctant to use very explicit, erotic imagery in its safer sex materials. In contrast, Austin has a vibrant and trendy gay community. As a result, the project promotes itself as a very trendy and exciting entity, and is very sex-positive with much more erotic safer sex materials.

Adaptation of the project to the local social and cultural environment is the task of the Core Group. From the outset, the Core Group learns how to conduct social marketing research in making decisions about the project by going to their peers who are not on the Core Group and asking for their opinions on various topics, as well as occasionally “test-marketing” project ideas. The Core Group is encouraged to carefully consider what is appropriate in their community, what would attract other young gay/bisexual men, and particularly, what would

attract men from diverse segments of the community. One of the first tasks they tackle is choosing the name and logo for the project. “The Mpowerment Project” was the name chosen in Eugene, which we have adopted as the generic name for the program. The logo was a flexed arm, surrounded by a gear, to depict a strong, powerful male image (see Fig. 1). After market-testing, the Core Group in Santa Barbara chose the name “Pride Mission” because the original Spanish mission was still a major part of the community’s identity, and the project was located on Mission Street. The word “Pride” added a gay touch to it. In Albuquerque, the Core Group chose a logo combining the sun and male symbol, resembling a Southwestern petroglyph. AMP (Austin Men’s Project) was chosen by the Core Group as the name of the project in Austin, evocative of the tremendous music scene there (see Fig. 1).

The Core Group also considers the community’s culture and social environment in deciding what types of activities and materials are developed. The Eugene project held large dance parties that were very successful because there was no alternative in the community (only one small gay bar). In Austin, however,

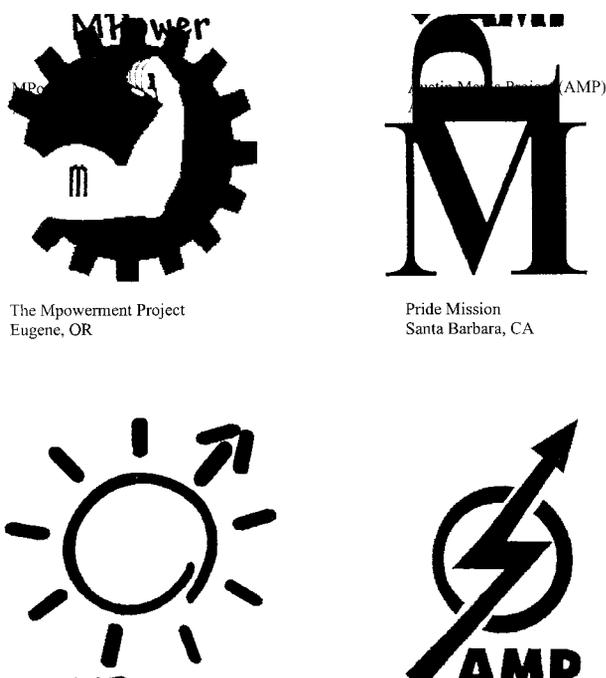
there were numerous gay bars, many of which have large state-of-the-art dance floors and are very popular. Rather than attempting to stage large dance parties that competed with these, AMP sponsored events such as the “Gay Games,” an afternoon in the park featuring a variety of athletic events, a pool party, and a fashion show—all of which drew large crowds.

## CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING THE MPOWERMENT PROJECT

Given the nature and complexity of the Mpowerment Project, there are a number of challenges that we have encountered in implementing the project in the various communities. Several of these are discussed below.

### Difficulties for Project Coordinators

The essence of the Mpowerment Project is that it is a peer-run program, which necessitates that the project coordinators be young gay/bisexual men. While the men hired tend to have enormous enthusiasm, commitment, and creativity, it is rare for them to have much experience in running an organization. Project supervisors must therefore work very closely with them, particularly in the early stages of the project as they develop their skills. In addition, the management style of the coordinators often needs coaching. Rather than the coordinators simply directing the projects’ activities themselves, the Mpowerment Project philosophy requires that tasks be performed in an egalitarian, participative manner that actively involves the Core Group and other project participants. This approach can be frustrating for the coordinators whose natural tendency may be to simply do the task themselves in the quickest, most efficient way—which does little to foster the ownership and empowerment of project participants. In addition, young gay/bisexual men face many difficult issues at this stage of life, such as developing new relationships, boyfriend issues, and difficulties with other issues such as parents, school, and substance abuse. Over the course of the project, the coordinators and Core Group members are likely to have considerable “drama” in their lives, much of which will be carried over into the project. These personal crises can provide unforeseen problems and challenges that affect the project’s day-to-day functioning. Oftentimes volunteers seek help and support from coordinators



**Fig. 1.** Project logos developed by Core Groups in each intervention community.

on issues that the coordinators are still struggling with themselves. Again, close supervision and providing referrals to relevant services are important. In addition, since the coordinators and project participants are all young gay/bisexual men, the boundaries between the coordinators' "work-selves" and their "private-selves" may become blurred. Finding a balance between their job and their personal life is challenging, especially since as a leader of the project, project participants observe the coordinators' lives and activities with great interest.

### **Building a Strong Young Gay/Bisexual Men's Community**

Although most everyone will agree that community building is desirable, some tension may emerge when community members hear that the project is targeted at young men with no services for women or older men. When criticisms of sexism or ageism are directed at the project, we respond directly with epidemiology, explaining that statistics show that young gay/bisexual men have the highest HIV incidence in the communities within which we work and that intervention research shows that programs are most effective when they are targeted specifically for a particular risk group. Typically women have not complained about being excluded from project activities. However, we have occasionally encountered resentment among some older men who feel excluded, partly because of the fact that few social activities exist for older men in most communities. The project handles this issue by only marketing the project to young men using images and styles appealing to young men. However, with the exception of the M-groups, anyone who shows up for an event is welcome to attend.

One issue that has emerged in each community is the perception that the project is a clique. This is particularly frustrating since the project's goal is to reach *every* young gay/bisexual man in the community, but it is understandable. Many young men do meet and develop friendships with fellow project participants and they can be seen hanging out together in cafes and bars. The project's challenge is to communicate that others are welcome to join them. All outreach and publicity materials invite men to become involved. At project events, coordinators and Core Group members are asked to keep their eyes out for new faces and personally welcome them and introduce them to others. They also ask them to complete an Interest Sheet that invites them to volunteer with the project in a variety of ways. These men are then added to the

project mailing list and sent project updates and invitations to all project events. In these ways, the pool of project participants continually grows and remains dynamic.

Creating the "right" image for the project in a given community can be difficult. The project's HIV prevention focus combined with its "no alcohol or drugs" policy can make the project seem like a bunch of boring "Pollyannas." On the other hand, the sexually provocative outreach materials and the explicit sex talk in the M-group can give the impression that the project is a sexual "meat market" or "sex club." We have found the best way to counter these perceptions is to carefully test-market all project-promotional materials and for the project participants to talk with their acquaintances about their experiences with the project and to invite them to see the project for themselves.

### **Keeping the Focus on the Project Principles**

An issue that we have encountered in every community is that the Core Group sometimes focuses primarily on the social aspects of the project and the HIV prevention aspects are neglected. For example, the Core Group may prepare a large social event with great decorations, music and refreshments, but forget about the safer-sex-promotional element of the event. Likewise, the Core Group may plan a smaller social event but not make a concerted effort to invite new men to it, thus forgetting the community-building and diffusion principles of the project. One solution is the use of detailed event-planning checklists in which the Core Group specifies the goals for the event, and afterwards uses the form to evaluate how well the goals were achieved. Project supervisors may also need to speak up if they don't see this happening and remind the Core Group of the project goals.

### **Funding the Project**

The Mpowerment Project was designed to be relatively inexpensive to operate, relying primarily on volunteers and not requiring high-tech equipment. The main expenses are coordinator salaries and rent for the center. The total budget for 1 year is comparable to that for other HIV prevention programs conducted by community organizations. Costs can be reduced by sharing the project space with another organization and soliciting donations for many of the materials. All of the communities in which we have

worked have been able to generate funding to continue the program on their own. Kahn et al. (2001) found that the Mpowerment Project was highly cost-effective, considering the number of HIV infections it may avert compared with the lifetime medical costs of treating someone with HIV.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The Mpowerment Project's community mobilization process is designed to be self-perpetuating. Men who come to social events are recruited to attend M-groups, where they are encouraged to conduct informal outreach with their peers and become involved as volunteers in designing and carrying out formal outreach activities. The formal and informal outreach in turn brings in new men to the project. The goal is to set in motion an ever-widening diffusion process by which young men communicate with each other about HIV prevention. Given the ongoing and multifaceted nature of the intervention activities, it is hoped that all young gay/bisexual men in the community will be reached via at least one of the intervention activities. Ideally, the majority of men will be reached with several risk-reduction messages through several sources over time, thus increasing the likelihood that the message will be internalized. Since new young men will always be coming out and unfortunately HIV will continue to be a threat to gay/bisexual men for many years, it is critical that HIV prevention be institutionalized into young gay/bisexual men's socialization. The Mpowerment Project is one way of doing that.

In addition, the Mpowerment Project has benefits for young gay/bisexual men beyond HIV prevention. The Mpowerment Project provides an opportunity for young gay/bisexual men to connect with similar others in a safe, healthy environment within an atmosphere of caring and support. The project's multiple activities offer a variety of opportunities for young men to become actively involved, develop their competencies, help their community, and develop a sense of mastery and personal empowerment. Ideally, the project creates a collective, community empowerment that emboldens young gay/bisexual men to organize together for taking on the many other challenges in their lives.

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