Objectives

To familiarize you with an important optional element of the Mpowerment Project, the Community Advisory Board (CAB),

1. the role of the board;
2. composition;
3. personal qualities
4. selecting members, and;
5. operation.
Role of board

The Community Advisory Board (CAB) serves as a resource to the Core Group, and helps to nurture and support the Project. It is comprised of men and women who are community leaders and come from the AIDS, gay and lesbian, public health, business, and university communities. The CAB typically meets with the Core Group monthly or bimonthly to provide guidance on Project activities. Its members are individuals in positions of power within the community, or who are particularly knowledgeable about or well connected within the community. Consequently, not only are they able to provide the Core Group with valuable information and advice, but they can also be instrumental in providing access to resources that will facilitate the Project’s operation, such as locating a Project space. They also possess an important historical perspective about the community, such as how other programs have handled similar issues or situations that the Core Group may now be facing.
As the name implies, the CAB is not involved in the day-to-day operations of the Project. Rather, it serves as a sounding board for the Core Group as it formulates long-range plans for the Project or conceptualizes major activities. The role of the CAB is purely advisory; it does not operate as a board of directors, since most community-based organizations already have a board of directors. The implementing agency’s board of directors may occasionally want to give input to the Core Group (or to the Project Supervisor), but will usually not have time to do so. In contrast, the CAB can give all of its attention to the Project, and therefore can be a helpful addition to the implementing agency. The CAB has no fiduciary (financial) responsibility for the Project. The CAB is not a Core Element of the Mpowerment Project. Many Projects, when implemented by community-based organizations, do not have CABs, and this advisory group is not an essential ingredient for implementing the Mpowerment Project. However, CABS often can be very helpful, particularly in securing financial resources and providing guidance.

**Liaison with community**

CAB members often fulfill a liaison role by providing a link between the Project and the organizations they represent. They keep their organizations informed of the Project’s progress and current activities. By virtue of their connection to various community organizations, CAB members also are in a good position to help the Core Group network in the community.

**Ensuring the Project’s future**

Another potential role of the CAB is to generate ideas and support for continuing the Project beyond its initial funding period. Often many CAB members may be the same individuals who make decisions regarding HIV-prevention planning and funding in the community. Including these individuals on the advisory board, as well as incorporating their ideas and feedback into Project activities, helps ensure that the Mpowerment Project will meet the HIV-prevention needs that they identify as critical for the community. It also instills in CAB members a sense of ownership of the Project. By participating on the advisory board, these individuals are kept fully informed of the Project’s activities and plans. All of these things help to increase the likelihood that community leaders and decision makers will perceive the Project’s activities as important and a part of a broader community effort.
Composition of the CAB

CAB members are individuals in positions of power or are particularly knowledgeable about or well connected within the community, and can provide valuable advice and access to resources that help the Project.

Diversity

Since a key function of the CAB is to generate support for the Project, membership on the CAB should reflect the community in which the Mpowerment Project is implemented. By having a CAB that reflects the diversity within the local community, there should always be someone able to provide the perspective of its various constituent groups.

In selecting CAB members, Project organizers should draw from the findings of the community assessment (see Module 2: Community Assessment). The assessment findings will be helpful in choosing CAB members who can represent all the relevant constituencies in the community. Generally this will include men and women, gay/lesbian and straight people, and members from each of the main ethnic/racial groups in the community. The CAB should be a workable size: 10 to 12 members are optimal. Representatives from the following key community sectors should be on the Community Advisory Board:

- HIV/AIDS prevention organizations
- city/county public health department
- gay community (gay community center, relevant gay organizations)
- local college or university
- social service agencies that work with young gay/bisexual men
- the various communities of color
- LGBT business leaders: especially bar owners/managers and leaders in LGBT chambers of commerce

When working in some ethnic/racial minority communities, other expertise on the CAB might be desirable as well. For example, given the central importance of spirituality and religion for African Americans, it can be helpful to have someone from the faith community on the CAB who can give advise about how to weave spirituality into the Project. Of course, this person also has to be supportive and accepting of young gay/bisexual men. When conducting a program for young Latino gay/bisexual men, it may be important to have someone on the CAB who knows about immigration issues in order to provide advise on this important issue.

Personal qualities

In selecting CAB members, it is extremely important to consider the candidates’ personal qualities. All members must support the philosophy and mission of the Mpowerment Project. Individuals...
Don’t rely solely on those who have been serving on similar boards for years.

If you plan to implement the Mpowerment Project in your community, it is likely that you already know individuals who would be appropriate for the CAB. Members serving on boards of various community organizations might welcome the opportunity to get more involved.

It is equally valuable, however, to make sure you invite some “fresh” community voices to be on the board, and not rely solely on those who have been serving on similar boards for years. This will help to ensure that the Project maintains its innovative perspective and does not fall into the same patterns as previous HIV-prevention programs in the community. For this reason, it is important to have on the CAB several gay community leaders who may not be affiliated with any particular organizations, but who are perceived by young gay/bisexual men—and the gay community in general—as wise, committed people who may have a lot of ideas and energy to offer the Project. Representatives from the gay bars,
the gay press, and gay professional and social organizations can be especially helpful in facilitating Project activities.

**Making a list of potential CAB members**

The implementing agency can meet with the Core Group to generate a list of potential CAB members. Candidates for the CAB may have been mentioned in the community assessment conducted by the Project Coordinators (see Module 2: Community Assessment). The implementing agency and the Core Group together can consider each candidate, basing their discussion on the criteria presented above, and then agreeing on a final list of candidates through consensus.

**Meeting with candidates**

The Coordinators should meet with each candidate individually. During the meeting, they should discuss the goals of the Mpowerment Project, the role and responsibilities of the CAB members, and why the person is being considered for board membership. Meeting personally with each CAB member prior to the board’s first meeting ensures that everyone coming to the meeting will be “on the same page.” Don’t make the mistake of not meeting with particular CAB members prior to the board’s first meeting. Otherwise, you may discover after it’s too late that a particular member has a personal agenda that disrupts meeting deliberations. We recommend not offering a CAB position to candidates until the Coordinators have met with each person. The initial meeting can be described to the candidate as an opportunity for the Coordinators to describe the program to the person. It can be helpful to ask each prospective CAB member who else he or she thinks might be considered for the CAB, and leave the meeting without asking the individual to join the CAB. This allows time to think through, after the meetings have been completed, who would work well together. It can be quite awkward to invite people to join the CAB and then find out in subsequent individual meetings that certain people do not get along well together. We suggest starting the Core Group and beginning Project activities before convening a CAB. This facilitates the Core Group being the leaders of the Project rather than CAB members misunderstanding their roles and thinking that they should direct the program.

**How the CAB operates**

Typically the CAB meets monthly or bimonthly, although for some Projects quarterly meetings are sufficient. All Core Group members may not be interested or able to attend CAB meetings, but it is important to have at least several Core Group members present in addition to the Project Coordinators. In the past, the Project Coordinators have facilitated CAB meetings, although in one community the CAB elected its own chairperson as facilitator. The typical agenda for a CAB meeting includes an update of current activities by the Project Coordinators, who highlight areas in which Core Group requests advice or assistance. This is followed by discussion among the advisory board members and Core Group. The meeting concludes after those present have
identified whatever actions need to be taken, and then assign specific tasks either to the CAB or the Core Group.

It is helpful for the minutes of the meeting to be sent to all CAB and Core Group members within one week following the meeting. Since CAB members are busy people, they may not be able to attend each meeting, but it is important to keep all members informed about what happens at the CAB meetings. A Core Group representative can then personally contact absent CAB members to solicit any additional input they may have to offer.

**Another possible role for a CAB: life skills mentoring**

If the group of young gay/bisexual men that a Project is trying to reach has many economically disadvantaged members, it may be important to include life skills as an issue to focus on in the program. For example, young men may need to learn about how to balance a checkbook, rent an apartment, or apply for and keep jobs. CAB members may be willing and interested in meeting with the Core Group or other volunteers to discuss and provide mentoring regarding these issues. It may be helpful for some formal events to focus on life skills as, for example, through a panel discussion on employment issues, or workshops on resume writing and balancing checkbooks.

If the CAB is going to be providing such information and mentoring, it is first important to have discussions about how CAB members can appropriately support young men to have safer sex and know their current HIV status. This is because although the content of the CAB-involved events may not be safer sex and testing, issues about HIV prevention might arise nonetheless and CAB members should know how to handle these discussions. Therefore, it may be advisable for CAB members to receive some training on HIV prevention issues. (One possibility is setting up an M-group just for them.)

In addition, careful consideration must be given to the interactions between the Project participants, including the Core Group, and the CAB members. Although rare, there were occasions in some previous Projects that older men who were part of the CAB or younger men who were part of the Project were attracted to each other. Bringing the two groups together needs to be conducted in such a way that does not encourage the development of cross-generational sexual relationships. Hence, we suggest not creating activities that might encourage this. For example, we do not suggest that one-on-one mentoring sessions should be supported and encouraged by the Project. Instead, interactions between the CAB and Project participants should be conducted in group settings.