Objectives

To familiarize you with the concept of informal outreach, which involves talking with friends and acquaintances about the importance of safer sex and knowing your current HIV status. Informal outreach is taught and men are motivated to conduct informal outreach with their friends in the M-groups. Informal outreach is encouraged and reinforced throughout other Project activities.
The need to build a supportive, caring, and healthy community

A major goal of the Project is to build a community of young gay/bisexual men who care about and support each other, particularly around the issue of sexual risk-taking. Many young gay/bisexual men never talk openly about safe and unsafe sexual practices, nor do they show they care for one another by expressing support for practicing safer sex. One of the Guiding Principles of the Mpowerment Project is building a strong, and healthy community of young gay/bisexual men, which is accomplished in part via informal outreach.

The Mpowerment Project seeks to create a young gay/bisexual men’s community that includes three new social norms. First, we try to establish a norm or expectation that young gay/bisexual men will practice safer sex whenever they are in sexual situations. The assumption is that young gay/bisexual men will have safer sex whether they are the top or bottom partner, and regardless if they are HIV-positive or HIV-negative. Therefore, making assumptions about each other’s HIV status is not required. Second, we try to establish a norm that men will know their current HIV status by getting tested at least once a year, or more often if they have engaged in risky sex. The third norm we try to establish is that men talk with their friends about their sexual behavior and encourage them to have safer sex. This is part of what it means to be a member of a supportive and healthy community: you express support and caring of each other in many different ways, including talking about safer sex. We encourage men to support each other about dealing with families that are unsupportive or rejecting of them, how to walk down the street without being bashed, not driving while high, coping with homophobia, and in being safe sexually.
Since many young men may have fairly limited social networks of other young gay/bisexual men, an important goal of the Project is to foster the development of new friendships among men in this group. The intent is that these new friendships include a shared belief in the value of safer sex, and a commitment to support one another in practicing safer sex. Thus, the Mpowerment Project strives to build a stronger young gay/bisexual men’s community, while simultaneously influencing the norms of the community to be supportive of safer sex. Informal outreach is the strategy the Project uses to accomplish these goals. By helping young men expand their social networks, they will gain additional opportunities to spread the message of safer sex and the need to get tested regularly for HIV, as well as additional friends who are supporting them in having safer sex.

Marching to a different drummer
Most HIV prevention programs rely on trained health outreach workers to encourage men to be safer in their sexual activities. One of the ways that the Mpowerment Project differs from more traditional approaches to HIV prevention is its emphasis on mobilizing young gay/bisexual men to support each other in reducing high-risk sexual behaviors. As described in Module 7: Formal Outreach—Social Outreach Events and Outreach Team, one way to accomplish this is through a number of formal outreach methods. The other major approach that the Project uses to encourage safer sex is through informal outreach.

Informal outreach occurs when young men communicate with each other about the need for safer sex. This type of outreach is called “informal” because it does not occur only during Project-sponsored activities. Rather, through its M-groups, the Project motivates and trains young men to talk—on
Informal outreach extends the messages about safer sex and testing throughout the community to men who do and do not attend the Project’s activities.

Informal outreach is the way that men reach out through their diverse social networks to reinforce messages about safer sex. These messages may be the most persuasive of all because they come from friends who care about other friends. Knowing that someone cares enough about you to talk about being safe sexually can be very compelling to young men, who may never have had anyone ever speak with them before about such an important issue.

Informal outreach and mobilizing men to speak with their friends also provides a way to reach men who never attend M-groups, don’t volunteer, and do not show up at Mpowerment Project Social Outreach events. The messages about safer sex and testing are taken beyond the doors of the Project space into the community. It is critical that Projects focus on the entire young gay/bisexual men’s community, and not just on those who come to the Project’s meeting space. This is a key strategy of the Mpowerment Project approach and relates to one of its Guiding Principles about the importance of diffusing messages about safer sex and getting tested for HIV. It is very important to diffuse these messages throughout diverse parts of the community.

M-groups address the importance of encouraging one’s friends to practice safer sex by discussing approaches participants can use and giving them an opportunity to do some role-playing (see Module 9: M-groups). The Project also motivates young men to conduct informal outreach as a part of their being in a supportive, caring young gay/bisexual men’s community. It also provides them with safer sex promotional materials that they can give to their friends (see Module 7: Formal Outreach—Social Outreach Events and Outreach Team).

A goal of the Mpowerment Project is to reach young gay/bisexual men in the community with multiple messages about safer sex and testing by using diverse approaches: written materials, verbal messages from friends, outreach performances, and Social Outreach events. Hence, informal outreach is the way that men reach out through their diverse social networks to reinforce messages about safer sex. These messages may be the most persuasive of all because they come from friends who care about other friends. Knowing that someone cares enough about you to talk about being safe sexually can be very compelling to young men, who may never have had anyone ever speak with them before about such an important issue.

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There are a number of tried-and-true techniques that reinforce and support Project participants in continually promoting safer sex within their social networks. These are described below.

**Supporting Informal Outreach with Core Groups**

Periodically it is important for Core Group members to discuss and evaluate their success in talking about safer sex with friends. Projects around the country have reported that this is helpful in increasing informal outreach. After analyzing potential barriers to discussing safer sex with friends, the Coordinators should encourage Core Group members to talk to their friends in a way that would be comfortable for them. Then in a subsequent Core Group meeting, the Coordinator can ask the Core Group members to report back to the group about their experiences. In this way, problems or difficulties in talking about safer sex can be discussed, resolutions can be proposed, and the guys can be praised for their efforts.

**Supporting Informal Outreach through the use of the Project space**

Furniture in the Project space (e.g., comfortable chairs, sofas, etc.) can be arranged so it maximizes conversations between men. Safer sex promotional posters can be placed strategically, and condoms and lube should be available in bowls in every room. Not every conversation in the houses focuses on safer sex, but many do. Often Project participants, whether they are volunteers or Core Group members, will approach a Coordinator or a Core Group member and ask them about safer sex, or confide in them about issues they are having in being safe.

Posters can be developed and displayed in the Project space regarding the need to talk to friends about safer sex. As is discussed elsewhere, posters can be developed relatively easily on a computer and then printed at a copy store. Talking about safer sex and HIV/AIDS prevention does not occur spontaneously, so having visuals nearby can often stimulate conversations about the topic.
In order to encourage informal outreach, a number of Projects have adopted a “scoreboard” as a way to address the importance of young men encouraging each other to have safer sex. The scoreboard concept is quite simple. Essentially whenever a group member talks to a friend about safer sex, he simply adds a check on the board for each person he spoke with. The board can be posted in the Project space to serve as a visual representation of how much informal outreach has been conducted in the community so far, as well as a reminder to keep having these conversations.

Another way of encouraging informal outreach about safer sex and testing through the use of the Project space is with a question and answer format. You can either use a large sheet of paper on a wall, a dry erase board, or turn a wall into a chalkboard by using paint that becomes a chalkboard (Google “chalkboard paint”). On one of these you list provocative questions to which men provide responses. As men come into the space and see the questions and responses, they can provoke men to want to discuss what people have written, and begin to discuss some of the issues themselves. For example, “Do you assume that you and your partner share the same HIV status?”, or “How is it going talking to your best friend about safe sex?”, or “Has your best friend asked you about being safe?”, or “Do you know where you can get an HIV test?”, or “Have you ever gone to get tested for HIV with a friend?”

**Supporting Informal Outreach through the use of promotional materials**

Creating written materials that directly discuss the need to talk with friends about safer sex and testing, and then distributing the materials through outreach activities as well as displaying them in the Project space (or both) is another way to stimulate discussions of safer sex and testing. When Outreach Team volunteers plan their materials, make sure they include information about the need to talk with one’s friends about safer sex.

**Messages used in Informal Outreach**

The messages that men can give to each other about having safer sex and getting tested should vary over time. Young men who only say, “Hey, remember to have safer sex!” will quickly tire of saying this repeatedly—and their friends are likely to tire of hearing it. Messages can go far deeper. Men can discuss issues that are associated with why young gay/bisexual men have unsafe sex. For example, after attending a forum on spirituality and health in which safer sex was discussed as a part of caring for yourself, a young man was then able to discuss his thoughts on what he learned with
friends. Ideas about how to eroticize safer sex can be discussed with friends as well, as can planning ahead to have sex by carrying condoms and lubes when going out to a bar. Men who are encouraging their friends to get tested for HIV can talk about good places to get tested, and how the new HIV screening tests no longer require drawing blood. There are a great many issues that can be discussed. What can also be discussed is the idea that being a friend means you discuss these issues.

In our work with Projects that focus on African American men, an issue that often comes up is concern that someone who asks you about your sexual activities may “spread your business” to others if you reveal anything. This is an important issue: if the young men are asking their friends about what they are doing sexually, there must be utmost reassurance that gossiping about the friend’s sexual practices will not occur. However, it is not necessary to ask someone about their sexual practices or HIV status when conducting informal outreach. Discussions about sexuality can occur without the need to reveal anything personal.

Another way to be supportive to a friend is to go together to get tested. After talking about the importance of getting tested, sometimes it will come out that a young man is fearful of what he might find out, and he really wants a friend to accompany him to obtain a test. Certainly this is a wonderful way of providing support, and of course it requires complete confidentiality on the part of the companion.

The issue of gossip is a challenging and difficult issue in many young gay/bisexual men’s communities. Consciousness-raising discussions about gossip and spreading each others’ business is an issue that should be visited and revisited in Mpowerment Projects. Informal outreach should never be used as a way of obtaining information about a guy, and then spreading it to others.

Address the issue of gossip!