

## **Dating guidelines or policies and the Mpowerment Project**

This document describes some of challenges and solutions that may arise when intimate relationships form between Project coordinators and Project participants. We seek to detail our decisions in this area, and bring up further topics for consideration when contemplating the policies in place or being considered for your agency. We recognize that most CBOs have very smart, sensible policies regarding the personal relationships employees may have with clients of an agency. Often, such policies arise at AIDS Service Organizations to protect fairness in client access to services, such as food, housing, or monetary assistance. Additionally, programs that serve youth under the age of 18 may have moral and legal responsibilities to protect the welfare of minors involved in their programs. The Mpowerment Project is a different sort of program for many agencies. First, it is a peer-designed and led program, hence we do not think of project participants as clients. Second the Mpowerment Project is not designed to serve youth under the age of 18. Therefore, the protections that exist in many agencies to protect the rights of minors do not apply to the Mpowerment Project. The recommendations and experiences summarized below reflect these two realities.

In our experience implementing the Mpowerment Project in six cities and funding the Project in an additional city, we have not expressly prohibited coordinators from dating Project participants for several reasons.

Since the Mpowerment Project is a community-level intervention, in some respect, all young gay men in a community are ideally part of the Project. This includes the coordinators. We have generally felt that it is unfair to essentially tell our coordinators that they cannot date any young gay/bi men who live in their community. It becomes very difficult to draw the line between who is a participant in the program and who is not. Would the restriction apply only to

regular/consistent Core Group members? Young gay/bi men who attend the Core Group infrequently? Anyone who has attended an M-group? Anyone who has attended an outreach event (which hopefully is nearly every young gay/bi man in the community)? In general, though individuals take on specific roles, such as “coordinator”, we have avoided labeling who is a participant and who is not.

Additionally, the Core Group is not a static entity. Many men might only attend one Core Group meeting to check out the Project. Would attendance at any Core Group meeting exclude that individual from dating a coordinator? We surmise that if a coordinator and a Core Group member began dating, and there was a specific rule against doing so, then the Core Group member would simply leave the Project to comply with the dating prohibition. This situation often results in unhealthy gossip in the community and is counter-productive to the goals of the Mpowerment Project. Given that we have worked in relatively small and self-contained communities, we have felt that if a coordinator and participant were to try to keep their relationship secret, that this would undermine healthy community building.

The coordinators are also meant to be participants in the Core Group, but not really to have any additional “power” in the program than any other participant. The Project is peer-based and peer-run. Dating prohibitions magnify the differences between coordinators and participants—differences that we have tried to minimize. When coordinators and participants are unable to date, the coordinators are really no longer peers of the young gay/bi men involved with the program.

However, we recognize that the dynamics of the program can become complicated when coordinators and participants date. Different Projects have handled this situation differently. In Eugene, the Core Group decided that a new Core Group member had to attend at least 3 meetings before a coordinator could

ask him out (or visa versa). This restriction was created so that new Core Group members were not ever perceived as being “pounced upon.” Other Core Groups have asked guys in a relationship to recognize and be sensitive to the fact that not everyone is comfortable viewing long displays of public affection. In general, coordinators are reminded that the program is not their personal dating pool and they are expected to behave responsibly and maturely.

Most young gay men are challenged by relationship issues. Part of building a strong and healthy young gay/bi men’s community is for the program to help the young men (coordinators and participants alike) learn how to develop intimate, romantic relationships and to help the community learn to support these relationships.

While we do recognize that, for many young gay/bi men, finding safe spaces to be sexually active is a challenge, we do insist that young gay/bi men NOT have sex in the Project space or at Project-sponsored activities, because on-site sexual activity can make many participants extremely uncomfortable and can be destructive to community building.

One issue that has come up in several communities is what happens when, or if, a program participant learns that a coordinator is having unsafe sex, within or outside of a relationship. Coordinators need to understand that this situation can be very difficult for a Project. We can’t expect coordinators to be immune from the challenges that all young gay/bi men face, but we can anticipate this problem. In keeping with the philosophy of the Project, we can do everything we can to support and encourage coordinators, as well as participants, to be safe whenever they are sexually active.

Additionally, we have approached program supervision from an empowerment paradigm. In general, we try not to tell the coordinators what to and what not to do. Rather, we ask them problem-posing questions to help them understand the

nature of their role and to help them critically reflect on their work. If a coordinator expresses interest in a participant, we often ask the coordinator what he wants to do with that. If the coordinator chooses to pursue a romantic relationship, we might ask the coordinator a series of questions such as: What will the consequences of dating a participant be for the Core Group? How will they handle any negative impacts? How will the coordinator avoid showing favoritism to his new boyfriend? How will they handle it if the relationship ends? How do they intend to approach the issue of negotiated safety (or not using condoms after negative status has been determined in both partners)?

We also understand that the lack of a dating prohibition leaves the coordinators “unprotected” by an anti-dating policy. This can lead to an uncomfortable situation. For example, coordinators are expected to act in a friendly and welcoming manner to all participants, and sometimes a participant can misread this friendliness as romantic interest. What happens if a participant asks a coordinator out and the coordinator declines? This is a hard issue, but an important one. Most people need to learn how to handle romantic rejection better. Hopefully, the Mpowerment Project is a safe and supportive environment where if a man’s interest or advances are “rejected” by a coordinator, or by another participant for that matter, open and non-threatening communication can occur between the two individuals and they can each find support from others within the Project.

This is a complicated issue all around. We actively solicit input and advice on this – and any other matter relevant to your agency. Also, please do not hesitate to call if you have any other questions, comments or insight.