



The Mpowerment Project + (MP+)

The Mpowerment Project has been enhanced to help young MSM (YMSM) living with HIV to engage in the HIV care continuum.

Background

The “basic” Mpowerment Project focuses on increasing HIV testing and reducing risky sex among YMSM. The Mpowerment Project+ (MP+) builds on the Mpowerment Project model to mobilize YMSM in the community to decrease psychosocial barriers (e.g., reducing HIV stigma) and increase psychosocial facilitators (e.g., increasing social support for engaging in care, increasing literacy about HIV treatment) to support YMSM living with HIV in order to increase their engagement in care. The MP model involves implementing the program’s original core elements for all YMSM regardless of HIV status, but for MP+ all the core elements have been adapted to focus additionally on supporting engagement in care. In addition, a new core element has been developed: the Positive Living Group. One additional optional core element is being developed at this time, the Friends and Family Group (both described below). Finally, we encourage the use of a Peer Navigator in the program.

The overarching goal of the project is to build an empowered, cohesive, and mobilized YMSM community that supports each other about HIV prevention.



www.mpowerment.org

[fb.com/mpowermentproject](https://www.facebook.com/mpowermentproject)

twitter: @mpcaps

#Mpowerment

There are four reasons for why MP+ does not solely focus on YMSM living with HIV:

First, the social networks of YMSM who are living with HIV include both HIV-negative men as well as men living with HIV. Therefore, to maximize social support for engagement in HIV care and to reduce HIV stigma, it is necessary to mobilize peers, regardless of their HIV status.

Second, concerns about HIV stigma dissuade many YMSM who are living with HIV from participating in a program if it is perceived as being solely for men who are living with HIV. Therefore, MP+ weaves in information specific to men who are living with HIV throughout all of the intervention's core elements and also targets the entire community of YMSM to support engagement in the HIV care continuum.

Third, for YMSM men who are unaware of their HIV infection or who are HIV-negative, HIV prevention messages are diffused throughout the community to create positive social norms and increase social support to promote regular HIV testing, reduce risky sex, and increase awareness of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PEP). Diagnosis of HIV infection is the first step of the HIV treatment cascade.

The fourth reason is that the project space is a social environment for YMSM living with HIV to disclose their status to others and receive emotional, informational, and practical support from other YMSM regardless of their HIV status.

The MP+ is

- Focused on social change (e.g., changes social norms, increases social support), interpersonal change (e.g., addresses couples' dynamics), structural change (e.g., provides a community center for men to gather and builds a supportive community, addresses the environment in which men live, provides condoms and lube at the project site and throughout the community through outreach), and increasing personal and community empowerment.
- A combination prevention strategy – it focuses on individual, interpersonal, social, and structural issues, and links both a social/behavioral intervention approach with biomedical methods.
- A community mobilization strategy, using community organizing methods.
- A social marketing approach.
- An approach that addresses social determinants of health (e.g., heterosexism, racism, low education levels, low SES, internalized oppression).

Core Elements of the Mpowerment Project + (MP+)

Below you will find a brief overview of each of the Core Elements in the Mpowerment Project, including adaptations geared toward YMSM living with HIV to support their engagement in care, what we refer to as Mpowerment + (MP+). For a fuller discussion of each Core Element in Mpowerment, please look at the manual, found on the website www.mpowerment.org.

As stated above, MP+ addresses issues around internalized and externally expressed HIV stigma reduction, social support to engage in the HIV care continuum, social norms about engaging in the HIV care continuum, HIV treatment literacy, and critical analysis regarding reducing transmission risk.



Along with adaptations to all of the Core Elements, MP+ includes three additional Core Elements specific to men living with HIV. It may be challenging to recruit men living with HIV to these activities early on in the project, until they begin to feel openly accepted at the project space, see for themselves how confidentiality is emphasized within the project, and observe the anti-HIV stigma messaging that will be diffused in the community. But as trust is built, men living with HIV will be more willing to attend project-sponsored activities designed specifically for them.

1) Core Group and Volunteers

In keeping with the program's empowerment philosophy, the Project is run by a group of volunteers, along with the paid staff. This group is called the "Core Group" and it consists of 10 to 20 YMSM from the community, depending upon the size of the city or town. If you are targeting YMSM living with HIV (MP+), priority needs to be placed on recruiting some Core Group participants who are open about living with HIV and are comfortable discussing HIV related issues. With the help of other volunteers, they coordinate and conduct all Project activities. The Core Group meets weekly and is empowered to make key Project decisions. These include deciding upon a name for the Project, planning Project activities, and developing Project materials. It is their job to think through what their YMSM's community needs, and how Project activities might meet those needs, while also infusing HIV prevention into all activities.

An Mpowerment Project that also focuses on young men living with HIV (MP+) would also have Core Group analyze the root causes for why some YMSM living with HIV do not fully engage in HIV care, and from those discussions the Core Group would derive project based solutions and carry out activities specifically about engaging in HIV care, why it is important to take HIV medications regularly if living with HIV, and the importance of regular HIV testing for persons who may be at risk. They also discuss how to reduce HIV stigma and gossip in the YMSM's community. Discussions during Core Group can help young men think through what is and is not helpful gossip. Core Group can also emphasize at meetings that one

should never assume the status of any Core Group member. Core Group might decide to focus on one Men's Health topic a week, such as "assumptions made when hooking up" one week and "disclosure of HIV status on hookup sites" another week.

Some young men in the community may want to help with the Project but do not have the time to be a member of the Core Group. These men can get involved in the Project in many other ways, including helping out with a specific event, maintaining the Project Space, participating on the Outreach Team, and/or helping to publicize the Project. Input from Project volunteers is extremely important to the overall functioning and success of the Project. Each time a young gay/bisexual man volunteers for the Project, they encounter—and hopefully join—a community of YMSM who support each other and who stress the importance of consistently having safer sex and getting HIV testing at least every 6 months. Short videos on different topics could be played during a Core Group meeting (e.g. one about medication, one about linkage to care, one about what a case manager could do to help young men living with HIV) and then young men could have a brief discussion about it afterwards. Watching this type of video in a public forum, as opposed to watching it in private on one's own, may help de-stigmatize the content.

While the Core Group, together with paid staff, runs the Mpowerment Project, there are many ways that other volunteers can get involved.

2) Project Coordinators

Coordinators are the Project's paid staff who are responsible for organizing all aspects of the Project, including volunteers and activities. They are the starting point for the diffusion process that spreads the testing and safer sex messages to YMSM throughout the community. The Coordinators are a part of the Core Group. A main aspect of their job is to facilitate



the empowerment of the young men who join the Project as volunteers. Calling them "Coordinators" is designed to call attention to the idea that they are not the directors of the program. Instead, it is their job to coordinate the various activities of the Project, and help young men make decisions and carry out the work of the Project. By doing so, they get to experience a sense of ownership of the Project and of the messages that the Project diffuses throughout the young men's community.

For MP+, Coordinators are trained in care, treatment, and adherence issues as well as available local HIV-related services. Coordinators can have conversations with young men

about the need to get into care and remain on treatment. It is important to have a Coordinator who is living with HIV, is "out" about his status, and is able to discuss issues about living with HIV from his own experience. It may even be helpful to have the job description of the Coordinators include a focus on testing, medical adherence and prevention with men living with HIV.

3) Project Space for YMSM

Ideally the Project has its own physical space, which serves as the headquarters for the Project and as a community center for YMSM. The Project Space is where the Project holds most of its Social Outreach Events and staff meetings. During certain hours it also serves as a drop-in center where young men can meet and socialize. The center provides participants with information about other community organizations and services, and makes referrals to these agencies as appropriate. HIV testing and safer sex materials, including where to obtain HIV testing, PrEP and PEP are also freely available there in multiple locations. Having a Project Space helps to address an important issue related to risk behavior among YMSM—namely that they have no physical location to meet that promotes healthy sexual behavior and builds community among YMSM.

For MP+, YMSM living with HIV, the Project Space can be a place to receive materials and information about how to talk with their health care providers in order to get their needs met. Posters about various topics can be on display, such as: tips for remembering to take medications every day; reminders that the space is a “gossip free” environment with respect to others’ HIV status; or the house rule “Never Assume Someone’s HIV Status”. The Project space could also dedicate a specific area (e.g., a bulletin board or white board in the bathroom) where referrals are listed and where young men could anonymously rate their experience getting tested for HIV or where they have sought treatment. And of course, condoms and lube can be found everywhere, freely available, all the time.

A list of themes for posters or materials to distribute (as well as many other social marketing campaigns/materials) can be found at the end of this document.



4) Formal Outreach and Social Outreach Events

Formal outreach includes two components: an Outreach Team and Social Outreach Events. Outreach Teams of young men go to settings frequented by YMSM to promote safer sex. This often includes “zaps” at local bars or a performance at the local community’s gay pride festival. Zaps are very brief activities that attract attention and promote safer sex, regular HIV testing or PrEP in a fun and entertaining manner. Since most communities typically

have few settings where YMSM can socialize, a major aspect of the Mpowerment Project's formal outreach is the creation of events that will attract YMSM and where safer sex can be promoted (in accordance with the Project's Guiding Principle that it contain a social focus). These are called Social Outreach Events. Young men who attend these events can then be invited to join other activities such as the Core Group and M-groups.

The Project sponsors a wide range of Social Outreach Events designed to appeal to each segment of the YMSM community. Depending on the ideas generated by the Core Group, these activities can include weekly movie or TV nights, house events, skill-building workshops, sporting events, discussion groups, picnics, community forums, hikes, large dance events, and so forth.

Mpowerment Project Outreach Events are designed to be enjoyable, and they are planned so that the promotion of HIV testing, safer sex, can be incorporated into the event in some way. For example, at dance parties the Outreach Team may perform a theatrical performance piece to motivate young men about safer sex and generate interest in becoming involved with the Mpowerment Project. The Outreach Team uses playful, entertaining approaches to motivate young men about safer sex, PrEP and HIV testing, and to encourage them to adopt and maintain safer behaviors over time. The Project also develops materials for distribution at its performances. These may include safer sex information and motivational messages, condoms, lubricants, and invitations to Mpowerment Project activities.

Projects with a focus on YMSM living with HIV (MP+) can also include content with an explicit focus on issues critical to men living with HIV. For example, weekly discussion groups can sometimes focus on coming out as a young gay/bisexual man living with HIV, HIV stigma in the YMSM's community, dating and relationships when someone is living with HIV, and how to deal with healthcare providers and advocate for yourself. Community forums can focus on issues such as how to support friends living with HIV, spirituality, churches' acceptance of YMSM in general and those living with HIV in particular, or treatment updates by HIV care providers. Speakers can be invited to talk about linkage to care, perhaps with a "sexy doctor" and "drag queen nurse" scenario to make it fun. Or a "date with a Dr. Night" can be scheduled, where young men put a questions in a bowl for the Dr. to answer. Prepared questions could address issues related to living with HIV, such as why it's important to stay on meds and the improvements made in reducing medical side effects. Some social events may be exclusively for men living with HIV, whereas other social events can target all YMSM in the community.

5) Informal Outreach

Informal outreach consists of YMSM communicating with their friends in casual conversations about the need to engage in safer sex. The goal is to develop a process of communication that promotes safer sex across the entire community. Young men learn how to conduct informal outreach while attending the M-groups. In the groups, they are asked to make a commitment

to speak with several of their friends, give them safer sex packages, and invite them to an M-group. Participants also receive buttons, key chain lanyards, or some other visible item with the Mpowerment Project logo, which they are asked to wear to show their support for the Project and its mission. It is hoped that these items may trigger conversations among their acquaintances about the

Project. They also serve as a reminder to young men about the community norm for safer sex that the Project is seeking to establish.

Throughout the life of the Project, participants are reminded to talk with and encourage their friends to be safe sexually, consider using PrEP and to get tested for HIV regularly. In many communities there are subtle pressures that make it difficult for young men to talk with each other about personal or sensitive topics. To overcome these barriers, Coordinators can model informal outreach for everyone else in the program by continually discussing HIV prevention and testing with Core Group members and other young men in the Project. Seeing the Coordinators talking about having safer sex and getting tested for HIV helps motivate all Core Group members and other program participants to conduct informal outreach with their friends.

For Projects focused on YMSM living with HIV (MP+), Informal outreach involves encouraging friends who are living with HIV to take their medications every day, see their health care provider at least twice per year, and suggest that they attend a Positive Living Group and the Support Network Group, two additional Core Elements exclusively for YMSM (briefly explained later in this module). All men in the community, both those living with HIV and those HIV negative, can be encouraged to talk with their friends about taking care of their health. Men may need to be coached on how to do this in a respectful manner in order to be empowering and helpful.

6) M-groups

M-groups are peer led, one-time meetings of 8 to 10 YMSM of mixed HIV status. The groups last about three hours and are usually held at the Project Space, but they can also be held in participants' homes or at other locations convenient for young men. The M-groups Facilitator Guide should be followed closely, because each activity in the group has been carefully designed to target specific issues that cause YMSM to be at risk for HIV, fail to test for HIV regularly, or not engage fully in care if they are living with HIV. In addition, the "flow" of the group was developed so that members discuss topics of a more general nature at the beginning, but get into more sensitive information over time, after participants feel more at ease.



The M-groups have been revised and updated to reflect advances in HIV prevention and treatment. Issues specific to YMSM living with HIV have been woven into every section of the M-group.

The M-group focuses on factors identified in research as contributing to risky sex and lower HIV testing rates than is ideal among YMSM, and therefore seeks to:

- clear up misconceptions about being a top or a bottom sexually
- increase the enjoyment of safer sex
- clarify understanding of how to use condoms correctly
- build communication skills for negotiating sexual risk reduction

- address interpersonal issues that may interfere with sexual risk reduction
- discuss the importance of knowing your HIV status and getting tested for HIV regularly
- explain what PrEP (Pre-exposure prophylaxis) and PEP (post-exposure prophylaxis) are and how to obtain them
- motivate and teach men how to support their friends to reduce risky sex, get tested for HIV, and engage in care if living with HIV
- The M-group has also been updated for use by organizations that also focus on men living with HIV (MP+). The updated M-groups now address issues such as:
 - HIV stigma
 - that HIV treatment is highly effective at keeping people living with HIV healthy and virally suppressed
 - dispelling myths about HIV medications (e.g. that they change how you look)
 - why it is important to get into treatment as soon as you learn that you are living with HIV, and why having an undetectable HIV viral load is important

Since not all men living with HIV, men who fail to obtain frequent HIV testing, or those who engage in high-risk sexual behaviors are likely to attend these sessions, the M-groups also train participants how to talk informally with their friends outside the group to encourage them to reduce risky sex, get tested for HIV regularly, and urge friends living with HIV to get into care if living with HIV. In this way, the men who do attend an M-group can carry these important messages to their friends and acquaintances who have not attended a group.

The format of the M-group was developed through a series of focus groups with YMSM. It is designed to be enjoyable and interactive, and includes structured exercises, informal discussion, and role-plays. The M-groups are promoted as a fun way for YMSM to meet other young men, to find out about the Project, and to hear how other young men are dealing with issues of importance to them such as sex, dating, and relationships.

All young men in the community who are interested in being involved with the Mpowerment Project and MP+ are encouraged to attend an M-group as an introduction to the Project's goals and philosophy.

7) Publicity

In order for the Project to succeed, it is vital that it has an appealing, ongoing, and dynamic publicity to inform young men about the Project's goals and activities and attract them to it. The Project uses a variety of approaches to reach YMSM.

Publicity uses:

- multiple social networking sites
- articles, columns, community listings, and advertisements in the alternative press, and affiliated websites
- posters and fliers in settings frequented by YMSM

- websites, chat rooms, e-mail and text distribution lists
- “word of mouth” publicity by Core Group members and volunteers within their informal social networks
- university or local gay-themed radio shows
- digital palm cards and other invitations that participants can distribute to their friends using social media.

Establish an awareness of the Project among young gay and bisexual men.

www.mpowerment.org



The goals of publicity are:

- to establish an awareness of the program and its legitimacy
- to invite young men to become involved with the program and its activities
- to provide a continual reminder of the norms in the YMSM community for regular and frequent HIV testing, reducing risky sexual behavior, and for men living with HIV, engaging in care and striving the reach the stage of being “undetectable” with respect to of one’s HIV viral load
- The publicity campaign’s goals for reaching YMSM living with HIV (MP+):
- how to support friends living with HIV to engage in care
- messages to decrease HIV stigma (e.g. reducing gossip about others’ HIV infection)

A list of suggested themes for MP+ materials can be found at the end of this chapter/document. The list includes information that might be helpful to highlight for men in the community, such as:

- Having an undetectable viral load does NOT mean that the person is HIV negative. The only people who can be undetectable are those who are on meds and take them regular-

ly. Being “undetectable” or having a low viral load can greatly reduce the risk of passing on HIV.

- Did you know...
 - that many people became HIV-positive when they were committed and monogamous to their partners?
 - that most of us have made mistakes that could have resulted in being HIV-positive, if we’re not already?
 - someone who says they are HIV-negative may be positive and not even know it?

For specific real world examples of publicity and social marketing materials from Mpowerment Projects around the United States (and the world), google “Mpowerment flickr albums” or check out our flickr page here: <http://bit.ly/1VqRQ1Y>

The Mpowerment Project does not advertise via the mainstream media to avoid the program’s becoming known within the broader community as a program primarily for YMSM. Young men who are not comfortable being associated with a publicly gay-identified organization are often reluctant to become involved in such groups. Keeping a low profile also minimizes the chances that homophobic individuals may become convinced that the Project is somehow “promoting homosexuality” and so attempt to obstruct its work or even shut it down.

8) Community Advisory Board (optional)

Agencies may choose to have a Community Advisory Board (CAB) or to garner community support in other ways. If an agency organizes a CAB, it is the CAB’s role to assist the Core Group. The CAB is comprised of men and women from the AIDS, LGBT, public health, and university communities. Board members meet monthly or quarterly with the Core Group to offer advice on Project activities. They also provide a link between the Project and their respective organizations and communities. One key role of the advisory board is to generate ideas and support for continuing the Project beyond the initial funding period of a grant. The CAB is not responsible for monitoring how funds are spent or for evaluating the program.

For Mpowerment projects that focus on men living with HIV (MP+), it is helpful to find CAB members involved in the HIV care field, such as a doctor, nurse, HIV case manager or case worker. People who know the systems of care and treatment might be helpful and strong advocates when contemplating how to navigate such systems. A CAB member who is both living with HIV and publicly out about their status would also help in this capacity.

Three Additional Core Elements or MP+

In addition to the previous core elements, in MP+ there are three new core elements that have been specifically created for YMSM living with HIV.

9) Positive Living Groups

Since young men living with HIV want to talk with and get support from other men who are also living with HIV, we created a one-time, 3-hour small group of 8 – 12 men living with HIV to address a variety of issues. The groups are scripted and incorporate discussions, games, and fun educational content to help facilitate information sharing and encourage social support. The Positive Living Group Facilitator Guide lays out the format of the group. The group addresses:

- literacy about why medications are important to take and the importance of seeing a healthcare provider at least twice a year
- why it is important to get into and stay in treatment as soon as possible after learning that you are living with HIV
- why being virally suppressed (undetectable) is important
- ideas about how to remember to take medications every day
- how to obtain emotional and informational support about fully engaging in HIV care (including referral and retention in care and adherence to HIV medications)
- dating and thinking out what sexual activities are risky for transmitting HIV to others
- how to prepare for and get the most from visits with a medical provider
- providing and receiving social support from friends about engaging in care

10) Friends and Family Group (optional)

These groups bring together YMSM living with HIV and 1-3 of their close friends or family members for the purpose of building support for men living with HIV. The meetings are 2-hours long and, through a mix of role play and discussion, increase HIV literacy among the friends and family members in attendance (e.g., about the effectiveness and side effects of meds, awareness around what it means to be virally suppressed, how to become virally suppressed, and ways to support the men living with HIV to remain in care. The format of the group is scripted, and the Friends and Family Group Facilitator Guide is to be used for these small groups.

11) MP+ Navigator (MPN)



When MP+ Coordinators learn that participants who are living with HIV are not actively linked into care, the Coordinators will refer them to the MPN who, along with the Project Coordinator(s), will connect them with HIV treatment facilities and other services and help them develop ways to remind themselves to take their daily medications. MPN is not case management but does provide support, information, and referrals to case managers. MPN closely supports YMSM living with HIV to ensure that they link to and stay in care. Project sponsored activities encourage YMSM throughout the community to support their friends living with HIV to talk with a Coordinator or the MPN so that they receive services that will support them to link to, stay in, or re-engage in HIV healthcare and treatment, and to take their medications. Coordinators will be trained in care, treatment, and adherence issues, as well as available HIV-related resources.

Ground Rules

Mpowerment and MP+ use ground rules for being at the Project Space. They are discussed at the start of every meeting, and referred to when the space is being used for socializing or doing project-sponsored activities. The ground rules should be hung up in the Project Space. Please see the manual for a complete description of the Mpowerment ground rules, which include:

Mutual Respect
Confidentiality
“I” Statements
Have Fun

In addition to continuing these ground rules, three changes have been made.

The first change has to do with the ground rule of using I statements. This ground rule means that participants should phrase their contributions to the general discourse in personal statements, such as “I think...” or “I feel...” as opposed to “You should” or “all people think....” People come from different places and have different points of view and different ways of expressing them. Encourage participants to speak from their own experiences.

However, when men who are living with HIV are discussing their own experiences, it is acceptable to say instead, “I have heard from a friend that...” instead of using I statements. Stating that “I heard from a friend that...” might also allow YMSM to express what they think without having to “claim it” as their own, so it can give them a safe distance.

It can allow guys to talk about issues related to living with HIV without having to out themselves about their status.

The second change concerns confidentiality. This should be especially stressed in activities, emphasizing that no one should mention who attends activities for men living with HIV. In the Positive Living Group, participants are asked to sign confidentiality statements. This can be used throughout activities for men living with HIV.

Finally, there is an additional ground rule that should be added to posters and discussed at meetings if the project is especially focusing on men living with HIV:

Rule: Never assume anyone else’s HIV status.

Often we’ve noticed that someone may assume that no one who is living with HIV is around, and sometimes say things that are upsetting. The person can say stigmatizing things – meaning that a person might gossip about someone having HIV, or make generalizations about people living with HIV. It is important to be aware that many men who are around us and are participants in the program are living with HIV. So we also want to create a safe space where we do not assume anyone’s HIV status.

