

Recommendations to increase YMSM engagement in healthcare and HIV prevention activities

Increasing access to and engagement with primary care for YMSM is essential. Engagement in primary care is an especially important tool in the HIV prevention “toolbox” in this age of biomedical interventions like pre-exposure prophylaxis and “treatment as prevention”. HIV-negative YMSM can be linked to appropriate interventions and have regular sexual health screenings. YMSM who are regularly tested and engaged in healthcare will have a better chance of being linked to HIV care and treatment, should they acquire HIV. Programs that engage YMSM in healthcare should address their complex needs, including mental health, substance use, chronic health conditions, and social needs, in developmentally appropriate ways.

A combination of routine testing in all primary care settings and targeted community-based testing is necessary. Risk-based testing alone may miss high-risk individuals who are reluctant to disclose same-sex attraction and/or their sexual behaviors or substance use.

Comprehensive evidence-based sexual health education, inclusive of all gender identities and sexual orientations, is needed in the Philadelphia school district. Young people need sexual health education that promotes not only their health but their well-being.

HIV testing protocols should address concerns about confidentiality. HIV testing programs ought to consider who provides the counselling and testing, where testing occurs, and how to address concerns about confidentiality and privacy. It may be beneficial to include information about privacy protections and confidential testing protocols in outreach and marketing materials, in order to address those concerns before they can become barriers to testing.

Special attention should be paid to creating welcoming and accepting organizational cultures. Healthcare organizations need to prioritize the barriers, challenges and concerns of YMSM. YMSM want to go to providers who can relate to their experiences and accept them as they are.

Relevant information about local services, sexual health, and HIV/STD testing should be online in the places YMSM are likely to find it. Reliable online content will help many YMSM, especially those who are reluctant or unable to access services in the “gay” community. More local research is needed to better understand how Philadelphia’s youth access online health information.

Community level efforts are needed to address HIV stigma and discrimination of LGBTQ individuals, which persist and act as a barrier to open communication about the sexual health needs of YMSM.

Public health programs and healthcare organizations must be sensitive to the effects of stigma and discrimination on YMSM; especially minority YMSM who face not only stigma because of their sexuality and/or gender expression, but also live in a society with pervasive structural racism.

An excerpt from **Experiences in Healthcare and HIV testing in Philadelphia: Young men who have sex with men.** The full report can be found at <http://hivphilly.org/reports/YMSM.pdf>
April 2015