

Concept Note

Use of technology for effective outreach among MSM population in virtual space

Chandigarh State AIDS Control Society is implementing Targetted Intervention Projects among Men having Sex with Men (MSM) for prevention of transmission of HIV among them. Currently a target of reaching out to 1900 MSM has been allocated to three partner NGOs of Chandigarh SACS.

MSM/TGs are important HRG group who are highly vulnerable to HIV and are also a strategically important group for focusing HIV prevention programmes. It is important to know that not all MSM have many sexual partners, and are therefore not at a substantially increased risk for HIV compared to others. However, there are MSM subpopulations which do have high rates of partner change as well as high number of concurrent sexual partners, and those that often engage in anal sex with multiple partners are at particularly high risk, since HIV is more transmissible through anal sex than by other sexual practices. Members of the transgender population who have many male partners are also at high risk, since many of them engage in anal sex. Because many men who have sex with high-risk MSM and transgendered individuals also have other partners, both male and female, targeted interventions for these HRGs are strategically critical to controlling the HIV epidemic.

The term “men who have sex with men” (MSM) is used to denote all men who have sex with other men as a matter of preference or practice, regardless of their sexual identity or sexual orientation and irrespective of whether they also have sex with women or not. Coined by public health experts for the purpose of HIV/STI prevention, this epidemiological term focuses exclusively on sexual practice. This term does not refer to those men who might have had sex with other men as part of sexual experimentation or very occasionally depending on special circumstances. It should be noted that not all of those who engage in male-to-male sex do not necessarily identify themselves as homosexuals or even men.

The partner NGOs reach out to the population of MSM through outreach team comprising of Outreach Workers and Peer Educators. The following key preventing services are provided by the outreach team to MSM: -

1. Identification of new MSM for enrolment under TI programme
2. Differentiated outreach based on risk and typology
3. Interpersonal behaviour change communication (IPC)
4. Promotion/distribution of free condoms and other commodities like lubricants
5. Provision of basic STI and health services including oral/anal STI services through preferred private practitioners
6. HIV and Syphilis testing at ICTCs/FICTCs
7. Linkages to other health services (e.g., for TB) and social welfare services

However, reaching out to the key population of MSM at physical hotspot like park, abandoned areas, streets, market places, bus stand, public utilities, highway, railway station, lodge/Dhaba/hotel, cinema hall/malls etc. has become a difficult task. These physical sites earlier used to be the main sites for cruising and soliciting sexual partners among MSM.

Now-a-days there are several online platforms which are being used by MSM population for cruising and soliciting social and sexual partners. The key platforms include dating websites and

location-based apps like Grindr, Scruff, Tinder, Blued, Hornet and Planet Romeo, Social Media Platforms like Facebook & Instagram and instant messaging app like WhatsApp, Line and Imo etc.

There is therefore a felt need to include use of technology for effective outreach among MSM population in virtual space. Broad outreach themes which are proposed to be reached out through use of technology includes (i) HIV testing – Increasing risk perception (ii) Access to Community space, events and support (iii) Access to free testing, condoms and lubricants (iv) Referral support – Crisis management & ART and (v) Sexuality counselling and mental health support.

The operational research study is envisaged to assess that how to make use of technology for effective outreach among MSM population in virtual space. Besides that, other related issues which are also proposed to be assessed includes maintenance of confidentiality (of both beneficiaries and outreach team), technological barriers (access to computers/mobile/internet etc.), ability of outreach team on conversing online, development of message for use in online communication, linkages of online target community with physical service outlets like ICTC, ART etc.