



# Building Healthy Online Communities Meeting Report, September 2014

San Francisco AIDS Foundation | amfAR, the Foundation for AIDS Research

For the first time ever, representatives from seven of the largest gay dating and hook-up websites and apps have come together with HIV and STI prevention leaders from around the country to discuss how to create healthier online communities for gay and bisexual men.

Millions of gay and bisexual men, and others, seek partners online. Dating and hook-up websites and apps provide them with an efficient way to meet new partners. They can also play a vital role in helping their users access scientifically-accurate information and make informed choices about their partners. Finding opportunities for collaboration between website and app owners and HIV and STI prevention is key to promoting gay and bisexual men's health.

On September 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, 2014, San Francisco AIDS Foundation and amfAR, The Foundation for AIDS Research, invited website and app owners, public health officials, and community-based organizations to discuss which online strategies for HIV/STI prevention should be adopted. The meeting utilized data from a 2010 survey focused on the same topic (additional details below).

Both HIV/STI prevention and website/app technology have changed substantially since the 2010 survey. App use has skyrocketed. New HIV prevention strategies have emerged, including pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). Since we wanted to take these changes into account, we used the survey as a jumping-off point and invited the meeting participants to consider other strategies as well.

Websites and apps participating in the meeting included BarebackRT, Daddyhunt, Dudesnude, Gay.com, Grindr, POZ Personals, and SCRUFF. Three additional websites agreed to participate in the conversation but were unable to send a representative. HIV and STI prevention organizations included AIDS United, CDC, the National Coalition of STD Directors, the National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors, and Project Inform. Dan Wohlfeiler of the University of California, San Francisco, Jen Hecht and Tim Patriarca of San Francisco AIDS Foundation organized and co-led the meeting.

## We had three goals for the meeting:

1. Create efficient and productive relationships between website/apps owners and HIV/STD prevention
2. Critically evaluate current strategies for online HIV/STD prevention and generate new ideas
3. Develop an ambitious and feasible action plan for implementing strategies

## Several major themes emerged during the meeting:

### **Websites and apps want to support HIV and STI prevention.**

Website and app owners were explicit in their commitment to demonstrating corporate social responsibility to promote the health of their users.

All the websites and apps represented at the meeting have already taken steps to creating healthy environments on their sites, tailoring their efforts to meet the needs of their users. BarebackRT, a site for men who choose not to use condoms, offers many options for describing HIV and other disease status information in their user profile sections so that users can make informed decisions

about their partners (including viral load status for HIV positive users, “not sure” for those who don’t know their status, and “Neg + PrEP” for those who are taking PrEP). Daddyhunt offers users the opportunity to describe their own sexual health plan. Gay.com has focused on educating its users, including running numerous articles about PrEP.

“We created Benevolads to provide non-profit organizations and public health departments that work with the LGBT community a free and easy way to advertise locally in SCRUFF.”

**Jason Marchant, Chief Product Officer, SCRUFF**

### **Promoting HIV/STI testing is a high priority for all.**

All participants supported increasing HIV/STI testing as a key strategy to reduce infections and link individuals into care. Websites and apps were eager to promote HIV/STI testing by messaging through their sites, including sending automated testing reminders for users and links to testing sites that are searchable by zip code (such as [www.findstdtest.gov](http://www.findstdtest.gov) and [www.hivtest.gov](http://www.hivtest.gov)). Website and app owners endorsed CDC’s goal of increasing testing among MSM, for example by collaborating on promoting a day of testing for National HIV Testing Day or World AIDS Day.

### **Promoting a culture of respect will decrease stigma.**

Prevention experts and owners were all keenly interested in how to address stigma around HIV and other issues. Some site/app owners are already using “Live stigma-free” or “Poz-friendly” as a profile option to indicate that the user is open to meeting a partner who is HIV-positive or negative. Some are also promoting guidelines to support a norm of respect and caring on their sites/apps. POZ Personals caters to HIV-positive individuals, providing a useful service for those individuals who prefer other HIV-positive partners exclusively. Other ideas were to use sites/apps’ terms of service to reduce stigma and to promote existing anti-stigma campaigns (such as those developed by The Stigma Project).

“We decided to create a Poz community that members could join rather than checking off their HIV status, since not answering the question may be interpreted as dodging the issue, or putting people in the position where they have to lie.”

**Phil Anderson, owner, Dudesnude**

### **Websites and apps want to know what works.**

Many of the website and app owners expressed their desire to know what will be most effective in stopping new HIV and STI infections. While some sites have chosen to work with researchers of

behavioral studies, others expressed a strong preference for working with public health to pilot and evaluate new prevention strategies.

**“Many website and app owners need public health's experience and guidance to figure out what strategies can have the greatest impact.”**

**Carl Sandler, CEO, MISTER app, Daddyhunt**

All meeting participants were aware of the need to address many of the changes in HIV and STI prevention and care. In particular, site owners wanted to provide accurate information to their users about PrEP as well as data about the decrease in transmission associated with suppressed viral load for HIV positive individuals.

### **Streamlining and coordinating communications will improve quality and lower cost.**

App and website owners described the many challenges they face in fielding multiple requests from public health departments and community organizations. One site reported receiving requests for more than 2,000 profiles from multiple agencies to conduct outreach and partner notification online. They also described the difficulty in finding up-to-date information about the steps users can take to promote their own health, including updates on sexual health, HIV and STIs, testing, hepatitis, meningitis, condom use, and PrEP. They wanted an efficient and reliable source of information about disease outbreaks that they could easily pass on to their users. In response, CDC representatives described the many resources they already have available.

**“If you were to combine the money being spent independently by the different community-based organizations, it’s clear that it would be more efficient to do this in a centralized place.”**

**Michael Kaplan, CEO, AIDS United**

The HIV and STI prevention groups at the table also recognized the need for creating a more coordinated and streamlined approach to improve communication between public health and sites and apps, and the value of being able to quickly and efficiently communicate with their users, including being able to geo-target information. Website and app owners called on public health to help them better distinguish between providing basic information to their users and calling attention to a serious public health threat.

**“In public health, every crisis is a crisis.”**

**Sidney Stokes, Coordinator, Grindr for Equality**

## **Public health and websites can help individuals with HIV and/or STI infections notify their online partners; this needs to be adapted for apps.**

Many sites already support health departments in helping individuals to confidentially identify partners whom they meet online to inform them that they may have been exposed to HIV or STDs (known as partner notification). The 2010 survey showed that a majority of users supported the use of this strategy, and many site owners reported getting positive feedback from their users who had been notified through this process. Owners wanted to have a way to verify the agencies that are seeking to conduct partner notification online.

Participants recognized that mobile apps create unique challenges for conducting partner notification, since individuals may not have easily recognizable profiles. Some owners were eager to see new technologies developed that would be adaptable for use on the apps; others preferred to focus on messaging to promote HIV and STI testing, rather than partner notification.

CDC is revising a toolkit based on previous guidelines for health departments to use in technology-based partner service activities including partner notification so they can maximize the impact on STI and HIV transmission while being sensitive to, and respectful of, their users.

### **Next Steps**

Meeting participants considered a number of strategies for their sites. Participants chose to prioritize focusing on three efforts to promote users' health:

1. Promote HIV/STI testing
2. Fight stigma
3. Build an ongoing coalition of website/app owners and HIV/STI prevention leaders

These represent important first steps in bringing together the collective expertise and commitment of public health and website and app owners as partners to prevent HIV and STI transmission. We look forward to working closely with both sectors to advance the strategies that they prioritized. We congratulate and thank all the participants for their dedication to our community's health.

### **The 2010 Survey**

In 2010, STOP AIDS Project, California HIV/STD Prevention Training Center, and San Francisco Department of Public Health carried out an online survey to answer the question: *how can we improve online HIV and STD prevention for men who have sex with men?* The survey, funded by amfAR, engaged three key stakeholders: website owners, public health directors, and website users. All three groups answered questions about intervention ideas for reducing HIV and STI risk through websites. We identified eight ideas that were supported by all three groups, including automatic testing reminders, access to safer sex videos and sexual health experts, online partner notification options, and safe sex preference as a profile option. The report and published article are available at: <http://bit.ly/HealthyOnlineCommunities>.



**amfAR**  
MAKING AIDS HISTORY