March 14, 2022

To: HIV/STI Prevention Programs

From: Tim W. Menza, MD, PhD
         Medical Director

Re: Digital partner services for HIV/STI

Dear STI/HIV Prevention Partners,

Cell phones are a central part of modern life. Almost all Americans (97%) now own a cell phone of some kind and 85% of Americans own a smartphone.[1] Americans check their phones 344 times per day, or once every 4 minutes, and spend three hours on their phones each day. Most of that time is spent on texting, social media, games, and other apps.

Cell phone technology had clear implications for public health throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Both people with COVID-19 and their contacts did not answer their phones when health departments called to provide resources for testing and self-isolation.[2] Jurisdictions that expanded methods used for contact tracing to include texting and email increased the proportion of contacts who were notified and tested and who isolated to prevent onward COVID-19 transmission.[3]

Cell phone technology has implications for HIV and STI prevention programs in particular. With increasing use of cell phone technology, social networking apps (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok) and geospatial networking apps (e.g., Grindr, Scruff, Tinder) have proliferated as virtual venues used to find sexual partners. In Oregon, among people living with HIV surveyed in the Medical Monitoring Project, 75% of those who met a new sex partner in the prior year reported meeting those partners using apps. Similarly, among gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (MSM) participating in Portland's National HIV Behavioral Surveillance project, almost 40% reported first meeting their most recent sexual partner via an app or the Internet compared to 25% at a bar or club and 10% at a bathhouse or sex club (the next two most common locations). Heterosexual men and women, transgender people, and couples also commonly use apps to find sex. Apps are no longer "emerging" venues for finding sex partners; instead, they are woven into the fabric of modern sexuality.

Every local public health authority (LPHA) should be using digital technologies to contact people diagnosed with HIV or STI and their partners to increase the proportion of partners interviewed, tested, and treated.

- For LPHAs that are only using voice calls to provide partner services, the priority should be to include texting as a means of contacting people diagnosed with HIV or STI and their partners.
- For those LPHAs already using voice calls and texting, the priority should be to use social and geospatial networking apps for partner services.

- For those LPHAs already using social networking and geospatial networking apps for partner services, the priority should be to provide sexual health promotion and promote testing and treatment services on social and geospatial networking apps.

Digital partner services are standard of care. They are acceptable, culturally responsive methods to facilitate partner notification, testing, and treatment and can be provided in a way that preserves client and partner privacy.[4,5] It is imperative that LPHAs work with their decision-makers and information technology experts to create and maintain digital partners services programs to address STI and HIV transmission using the very technologies that our clients use. Furthermore, local campaigns to create awareness of partner services are vital for garnering community support for partner services in all forms to prevent the onward transmission of HIV and STI.

The OHA STI/HIV Prevention Program can connect you with experts who can provide technical assistance and guidance in establishing digital partner services programs. Please contact Jillian Garai at jillian.d.garai@dhsoha.state.or.us for more information.

Thank you for everything you do to reduce HIV and STI transmission in the state of Oregon.

Sincerely,

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Tim W. Menza, MD, PhD

References

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