

# “On the Front Line”

## Your Role in Productive Public Discussion of Preventing Sexual Transmission of HIV Among Young People

Agencies working to prevent HIV transmission have learned firsthand about the varied opinions -- often very strongly held -- about this topic. Sometimes, consensus among all those opinions seems impossible. Questions about how to prevent HIV transmission and AIDS raise tough, troubling issues for all of us. They force us to think about topics that may be uncomfortable -- topics like young people's sexuality.

CDC's Prevention Marketing Initiative deals directly with that issue, and because it does, it will likely be the catalyst for some tough questions -- questions you should be prepared for, to help people in your community or state understand all the viewpoints and the public health rationale for the Prevention Marketing Initiative and its new public service announcements.

This document provides you with various communications tips to help you guide the public discussion so that it's productive and helpful -- and stays focused on public health.

*Remember: In dealing with controversial topics, there's no such thing as being overprepared.*

### Preparing for the Public Discussion

It's important to anticipate the kinds of questions different groups might have about the Prevention Marketing Initiative, the new PSAs, and your agency's role in the campaign. Typical questions might include some or all of the following:

- Who are these messages for?
- Where will they run?
- Why is the government encouraging young people to have sex?
- What's your role in this?
- I thought condoms don't work a lot of the time -- isn't the government actually putting people at risk by encouraging them to use condoms?
- Why aren't there more young people in the PSAs?
- AIDS and HIV infection are still most common in gays -- why aren't there any gays in the PSAs?

Of course, you will have many other questions, some of which may be very specific to your own community or state, arising from past education and information campaigns and programs, past and current relationships between groups with different opinions on the topic, and other community- or state-specific issues.

To best prepare to answer varied questions, from varied viewpoints, we suggest developing a Ten Questions Worksheet. The worksheet will include --

- ◆ Questions you have found difficult to answer in the past.
- ◆ Information particularly relevant to your agency's position on the Prevention Marketing Initiative and PSAs, your role in the campaign, programs you have implemented or plan for young adults, and statistics on young people and HIV/AIDS.
- ◆ The points you want to get across.

After you develop the worksheet, spend some time formulating your responses. This is not something you should rush -- you should continue preparing until you really feel "up to speed" on the issues and the various views about them. You may want to practice out loud, to hear your own inflections and how you put your thoughts into sentences. Once you've finished, you should be pretty comfortable with a broad range of questions. Now you're ready to address communication style.

*Remember: A skilled handler of tough questions never strays far from the prepared text.*

## **Perfecting Delivery**

- ◆ Preface your statements by acknowledging that everyone does not agree with your position. Say that you appreciate being able to share research findings and the prevention strategies from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- ◆ Practice your answers, but don't memorize them. Your statements should be as natural as possible. As much as possible, distill your messages to "sound bites" that you can constantly re-emphasize your primary points. If you can, get someone to fire tough questions at you.
- ◆ Remain patient and calm. Remember that when people express opposing views, they are expressing their opinions -- not attacking you personally. Also remember that you may need to work with that person sometime in the future -- don't burn any bridges, even though you may be tempted!
- ◆ Keep your answers as short as possible while still getting your primary points across. Thirty seconds to a minute is usually the maximum.
- ◆ Maintain eye contact with the questioner and with any others in the room. If you have "cheat sheets," don't read answers, and try not to look down, up, or away from others -- this often appears evasive to listeners.

- ◆ Lean slightly forward, toward the questioner -- this body language emphasizes nonverbally that you are seeking approach and common ground.
- ◆ Smile, if it's appropriate. Above all, don't frown!
- ◆ If it's comfortable and natural for you, use hand and arm gestures -- for example, tick off points on your fingers or emphasize inclusiveness with a scooping gesture toward your body. Don't use threatening movements, such as pointing fingers, making fists, or hitting a lectern or table.

*Remember: How you say something is nearly as important as what you say.*

## Handling "Loaded" Questions

- ◆ Never debate questions in an argumentative way. In responding to a question based on a position you oppose, use it as an opportunity to make the most positive points you can. For example --

Question: Studies confirm that condoms have almost a 16% failure rate. Why is CDC putting people at risk by suggesting otherwise?

Answer: That statistic is from studies that don't distinguish between consistent and inconsistent condom use. And those studies are looking at condoms for birth control, not HIV prevention. That's comparing apples and oranges. For example, a study of couples who consistently used condoms to prevent HIV showed a 0% failure rate. And condoms undergo demanding quality control tests, including tests for holes, before they can be sold.

- ◆ Begin by discussing areas of agreement. For example, "We all agree that abstinence is the most effective HIV prevention strategy. For people who choose to be sexually active, though ...."
- ◆ Be very careful when asked to respond to hypothetical questions, such as, "How would the health department view ....?" If you choose to respond, make it absolutely clear that you're responding to a hypothetical question and that you're only speculating. A better response may be something like, "Well, that's a hypothetical situation. We faced something similar recently [give the details] and here's what we did [give the details]."

- ◆ Be aware of “forced choice” questions. The correct answer may be neither.

**Question:** Is the government advocating condom use instead of abstinence?

**Answer:** No. We all know that refraining from intercourse with infected partners is the most effective HIV prevention strategy. For young people who are abstinent, we have messages that support that choice. For young people who are sexually active, it is critical to provide them with information that may save their lives -- including using condoms consistently and correctly -- and equip them to take action to keep themselves free of HIV.

- ◆ If you are faced with false statistics or incorrect assertions, question the statistics and the source. Re-emphasize current research supported by CDC and cite official statistics.

**Question:** Only 10% of Americans want more information on HIV and AIDS. Why do you keep focusing on this topic?

**Answer:** Could you please give me the source of that statistic? Current research I've seen shows that Americans are concerned about the AIDS epidemic. In fact, although many people have traditionally been uncomfortable about sex education, nearly seven in ten Americans want the government to give them more information about AIDS, according to the most recent Roper Report. And an overwhelming majority of Americans support education about HIV in schools and want that education to include information about condoms.

**Question:** A recent federal government study shows that only about 500,000 people are infected with HIV. Why is this less than previous CDC estimates?

**Answer:** The study, conducted by CDC's National Center for Health Statistics, did not include certain populations likely to have higher numbers of HIV-infected people, such as homeless and incarcerated people and hospital patients. Thus, the percentage of people this survey found to be infected with HIV may not reflect the total American population. This same study determined that the number of Americans infected with HIV may be as high as 1.02 million or as low as 300,000, which is consistent with previous CDC estimates. CDC will hold a meeting in early 1994 to review the mathematical models used to determine these and other projections of HIV infection in the United States.

*Remember: Temperatures can rise when opposing views are discussed -- particularly on topics like young people and sex. It's critical that you keep control in these situations.*

## Simple Reminders

- ◆ Know your audience. When answering questions from the media, community members, and/or special interest groups, keep personal agendas in mind. They want to know how the campaign and your agency's activities relate to them or their audience.
- ◆ Defuse opposition by visiting or calling those who may oppose you in advance. Explain the situation and your position. Ask them theirs. Seek common ground.
- ◆ Avoid using jargon and acronyms. Although terms may be familiar to you and the people you work with, they may not be familiar to the media and the public.
- ◆ The goal is to hear all views and create harmony, not discord. Foes today may be friends tomorrow.

*Remember: Consider difficult questions an opportunity to present the strengths of the Prevention Marketing Initiative, the public service announcements, and your program's work.*

### Sources:

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