The thumbnail below is available full scale at the end of this module and as a PDF download on mpowerment.org.

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The Mpowerment Project's Guiding Principles

Guiding Principles from theories of behavior change and from interviews with young gay/bisexual men and service providers serve as the foundation for this HIV prevention program. The Guiding Principles are described below, and are used to guide all Core Elements (components) of the Mpowerment Project. Scientific articles that describe the program's underlying theories can be found at the end of this manual and on our website at mpowerment.org.

The Guiding Principles inform all aspects of the Mpowerment Project. For various reasons, however, it is often necessary to adapt the Mpowerment Project. Sometimes it needs to be adapted in order to be effective with a population other than that for which the original intervention was designed, such as a different ethnic/racial group or for younger or older men, or because the sponsoring agency has less than optimal funding for it. Understanding the Guiding Principles helps agencies figure out how to adapt the intervention while retaining fidelity to the original model. Agencies that are proactive in anticipating how implementing the intervention might work within their organization and their community will have a better experience running their Project.

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Young men are very concerned with social and self-esteem issues

HIV prevention is not in itself particularly motivating or captivating for young gay/bisexual men. Agencies that try to reach young gay/bisexual men often report that it is very difficult to attract the men to their activities. HIV prevention efforts at an agency cannot be effectively implemented if young men won't attend. For example, it can be difficult to implement multi-session groups on HIV prevention. Most young men do not seek out help to change their sexual behaviors that put them at risk for HIV. It is important to recognize that HIV/AIDS is only one threat among many that young gay/bisexual men confront in a homophobic society where gay-bashing, discrimination, and battles over gay rights are commonplace. Young gay/bisexual men may be dealing simultaneously with issues of self-esteem, alienation, isolation, cultural/social identity, racism (in the gay community and in society in general), family problems, and financial, education, and employment pressures.

Therefore, the first Guiding Principle is that a successful HIV prevention intervention for young gay/bisexual men needs to tie HIV risk-reduction to the satisfaction of other needs, such as developing friendships, having fun, and enhancing self-esteem. Through focus groups, it became clear that social concerns—such as how to meet and have fun with other young gay/bisexual men—are highly motivating. Thus, a social focus became the central theme of the Project. Using appealing, fun, engaging social activities and incorporating HIV prevention into them is a way of ensuring that men will attend and hear about sexual risk reduction and the importance of HIV testing.

Peer influences are strong among young gay/bisexual Men

The second key issue guiding the development of the Mpowerment Project is the recognition that peer influence plays a major role in the lives of young gay/bisexual men. Numerous studies have shown that—regarding almost any type of behavior, whether it is smoking, drugs, fashion, political attitudes, or others—one's peers are the most credible sources of information, and peer pressure is one of the most highly effective forms of influence. Therefore, **the second Guiding Principle is that for the Mpowerment Project to be effective in reaching young gay/bisexual men, it needs to be peer-based and use peer influence.**

Building healthy community among young gay/bisexual men

Many young gay/bisexual men are frustrated with their local gay communities because there are few places to go to meet other young men and where they can safely be themselves. Young men often only have a few other gay male friends, and therefore they can feel lonely and isolated much of the time. Men under drinking age can typically only find each other online or at a few cruising places, and men at or over drinking age can also find each other at gay bars—but these are not health promoting environments.

Young men want to be with each other in a relaxed, comfortable environment where they can be themselves. The Mpowerment Project creates settings where

young men can express their identities with each other, find support, and most importantly, band together to take action on issues of importance to them. They can feel a part of something bigger than themselves: a young gay/bisexual men's community. Being a part of a young men's community where men support each other regarding safer sex and getting tested means that each young man in the community experiences support from many others about HIV prevention. Therefore, **the third Guiding Principle is that it is essential to build a young gay/bisexual men's community where men support each other about sexual risk reduction and obtaining HIV testing, where the social norms and expectations support HIV prevention, and where men help each other in coping with the stresses of being gay/bisexual**.

Empowerment promotes more lasting changes in behavior

The fourth Guiding Principle is that the Project serves a mobilizing and empowering function within the young gay/bisexual men's community—young men take ownership of the Project rather than having the Project carried out for them. From research in other areas of behavior change (Rappaport, 1981), it is clear that when individuals are actively involved in finding and implementing solutions to their problems, any changes they make in their behavior are more likely to last. Thus, providing young gay/bisexual men with a mechanism for analyzing issues and problems that they experience and coming up with solutions for these problems, and for designing and running the intervention activities themselves, foster a sense of ownership of the program and a sense of personal commitment to HIV prevention.

The Project focuses on personal empowerment. It helps young men analyze why they are at risk for HIV and why they do not get tested for HIV as frequently as they should. It also helps them consider what actions they can take to be healthier and withstand pressures that cause them to be at risk. In addition, the Project focuses on community empowerment: developing a community of young men that can address some of the stresses and strains that affect them.

Community-wide change occurs through interpersonal networks

The program's design draws from the theory of diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 1995), which states that members of a social system are most likely to adopt new behavioral practices (i.e., safer sex, regular HIV testing) when they see their peers adopting the behavior and communicating that they feel it is desirable and important. Therefore, **the fifth Guiding Principle is that community change comes about through a process of informal communication and modeling by peers within their friendship networks.** Increased networks are developed through the community-building activities of the Project, but men also take the messages about safer

sex and testing to men who may never attend any of the Project's activities. The Mpowerment Project facilitates a process for young gay/bisexual men to actively communicate with each other about safer sex and testing, and to encourage each other to practice these two things through these social networks. The goal is for safer sex and regular HIV testing to become the mutually accepted norm within the young gay/bisexual men's community.

Fostering pride: gay-positive, ethnic/racial-positive, and sex-positive messages encourage behavior change

The sixth Guiding Principle of the Mpowerment Project is that the program enriches and strengthens young gay/bisexual men's pride about who they are, and encourages them to explore and celebrate their sexuality by not just focusing on condom use but by including a wide variety of safer sex behaviors. Materials produced by the Project show positive images of young gay/bisexual men that reflect the diversity of the community. This Guiding Principle—about young gay/bisexual men taking pride in who they are—encompasses pride in one's ethnic/racial identity as well, particularly if they are young men of color. All activities designed to promote safer sex are fun, uplifting, and sex-positive; fear and shame-inducing approaches are avoided.

A "multi-level" HIV prevention program is needed to address a variety of issues and factors that contribute to sexual risk taking and reluctance to get regular HIV testing among young gay/bisexual men

Self-esteem, interpersonal and cultural issues, internalized homophobia, community norms, and many other factors all influence young men's risk behavior. Since young gay/bisexual men engage in unsafe sex for a variety of reasons, interventions that focus solely on one level of factors will miss men who engage in unsafe sex for other reasons. Not only should the Mpowerment Project focus on encouraging men to reduce their sexual risk behavior, it should also encourage men to get tested for HIV regularly. **Therefore, the seventh and final Guiding Principle is the need for a "multi- level" approach.** The various components of the Mpowerment Project try to address the variety of contributors to risk behavior and reluctance to test regularly. For example, Social Outreach Events and safer-sex Outreach Team performances and outreach materials change over the course of the intervention so that a wide variety of issues can be targeted.

During our research on the TRIP-1 Project, we observed that while the success of the Project was dependent to a significant degree on the effectiveness of staff, the Implementing Agency and the Project Funder also made major contributions to how well each Project operated.