



Going Underground in Memphis, TN to Support PrEP in the Mid-South Community

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Memphis, Tennessee is known for defining moments in Civil Rights history, championship BBQ and world renowned artists singing soulful music and blues. However, popular shows like the *First 48* and movies like *Hustle and Flow* highlight Memphis' extreme poverty, high crime rates and low performing schools. These factors play a major role in health care access and disparaging disease rates. For example, Memphis ranks first among the five largest Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA) for chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis and in the top 10 nationally among all MSAs for HIV incidence. Despite the advancements in HIV prevention, rates of new infection have not decreased in the black population (44.3 per 100,000 [86%]); among males (38.7 per 100,000 [79%]); or among youth aged 20 to 24 years (79.9 per 100,000 [23%]).¹

Pre-exposure prophylaxis (or **PrEP**) presents a new opportunity for the Mid-South. With the recent introduction of PrEP as a highly effective prevention modality, there is a push to saturate higher-risk groups such as men who have sex with men (MSM) and transgender communities with messages about PrEP. Unfortunately, being in the Bible belt and having conservative belief systems, coupled with contextual factors of HIV stigma, create barriers to promoting uptake among medical providers. Further, limited resources do not exactly make uptake of PrEP among those at substantial risk for HIV easy. The complex problems underlying HIV disparities research demand multidisciplinary approaches. Thus, disentangling and addressing these concerns in a cohesive and collaborative fashion has been the goal of community partnerships.

For Black Men who have Sex with Men (BMSM) living in Memphis, underground social networks (e.g., pageant families, house and ball participants, Greek societies) are an untapped source of support² when faced with sociocultural barriers, such as racism, lack of economic resources, and stigma related to sexual orientation and/or gender identity.³⁻⁴ These high risk social networks serve as both a "social and support network".⁵ BMSM/Transgender women construct alternative family networks, with members adopting committed and sustained roles as parents and children.⁶⁻⁸

Connect to Protect Memphis, an HIV coalition of community stakeholders, MSM and transgender gatekeepers, Shelby County Health Department/TN Department of Health, and The University of Memphis School of Public Health joined forces to address these issues. We used community-based participatory research (CBPR) approaches to more fully engage underground social network leaders to understand health needs and gain community support for incentivized testing and linkage to prevention services. Our project, *Connecting to Testing and Prevention* used pageants and balls to engage underground BMSM and Transgender networks to increase HIV testing, linkage and engagement in care for positives through HIV prevention interventions and providing PrEP for those that test negative. A peer driven planning group was created, appropriately named *The Headliners*, to coordinate events and provide "on-demand" HIV testing and PrEP promotion that catered to youth needs. *The Headliners* co-

developed and co-sponsored three prevention themed house and ball pageants, and implemented new policies and practice changes that increased HIV-related education, testing and linkage to PrEP. This CBPR project was one of many partnerships.

Participant engagement and ownership of the pilot development process made them invested in making it a success. Innovative testing strategies yielded 645 HIV tests with a cumulative HIV positivity rate of 4.50% (n=29). The cumulative linkage to care rate was 100% (n=29) and the cumulative linkage to PrEP rate was 33.9% (n=209). By offering testing in non-traditional settings, youth were empowered and took ownership of when, how and with whom they were tested.

In Memphis, we are seeing a paradigm shift with community engagement. The days of the community disease clinics and health workers leading prevention work during traditional hours and traditional efforts may be a thing of the past. Instead, a new set of energetic and passionate young BMSM leaders are influencing the tide of change and acceptance in Memphis.

Suggested Citation: Williams Stubbs, A and Pichon, LC. (2017). Going Underground in Memphis, TN to Support PrEP in the Mid-South Community. KConnection e-Newsletter, vol. 15, no. 2.

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