



SCHPRC San Diego Launch Meeting

Background

On June 4, 2021, the Southern California HIV/AIDS Policy Research Center (SCHPRC) hosted a launch meeting for San Diego County, organized on the heels of a regional listening session led by the NIH Office of AIDS Research. Objectives of the meeting were to: (1) introduce stakeholders in San Diego and surrounding counties to the work of SCHPRC; (2) continue conversations on the pressing needs of the region; and (3) brainstorm responsive research initiatives that could inform policy. More than twenty individuals participated in this meeting. Initial polls conducted among participants indicated that the majority were affiliated with the nonprofit sector and academia and are engaged in the fields of HIV, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), viral hepatitis, and harm reduction. An overwhelming majority (80%) were either not familiar or somewhat familiar with the work of SCHPRC although nearly two-thirds (64%) stated familiarity with policy research and advocacy.

Introductions to the SCHPRC included basic information about the community-academic collaboration model. This was followed by spotlighting a previous SCHPRC research study executed in partnership with Christie's Place, a community-based organization in San Diego dedicated to providing trauma-informed support for HIV care and prevention. The presentation focused on the integration of content matter experts from Christie's Place as well as training provided to staff new to conducting policy research and analyses. After presentations three "breakout groups" were convened for brainstorming ideas that might help inform policy interventions to improve a regional response to the HIV epidemic and its related syndemics – STIs, viral hepatitis, and overdose. The goal of small group discussions were to identify needs related to the topics discussed that might be addressed in the coming year and current efforts to address those identified needs.

Key Findings

Key populations identified included the following underserved communities:

- People who are aging and living with HIV and other comorbidities including neurocognitive disorders and cancer
- Women
- People without consistent access to technology, and who are therefore unable to access remote services
- People that rely primarily on drop-in centers that were closed as a result of stay-at-home orders (e.g. people experiencing houselessness/homelessness and people who use and inject drugs)
- People with unmet needs related to mental health services who require a more integrated approach to health services
- People engaged in the sex trade
- People of immigrant and binational experience

Key issues identified as areas of concern included the following:

- Social and structural determinants of health and siloed approaches to health care
- Social isolation brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and prevention behavior of masking conceals facial expressions, making it difficult for certain populations (e.g., people who use drugs, homeless) to trust community workers
- Impact of stigma in health care provision as it relates to drug use, sex work and Chemsex (using drugs to enhance sex)
- Gaps in treatment for substance use including use of new drug modalities and regimens (e.g., Medication Assisted Treatment [MAT])

Research topics of interest to participants included the following:

- Applying lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic to address HIV prevention and treatment (e.g. telehealth, telemedicine)
 - Identifying continued barriers (e.g. linking from a remote “visit” to getting lab work completed)
 - Identifying continued gaps in coverage (e.g. home-based testing)
 - Expanding education efforts into community settings similar to disseminating messaging on vaccination
- Focusing on cross border health where people are traveling across borders on a regular basis to engage with healthcare
- Identifying opportunities to study PrEP access among military communities

Needs and challenges in developing meaningful and community-engaged research were identified as below:

- Building research readiness in community spaces requires greater investment of resources, including expanded funding
- Capacity building must be tailored to people embedded in communities who look like and represent targeted populations
- Learning opportunities must move beyond training staff to deliver specific interventions and connect to broader research skills
- Addressing mistrust requires that research spaces be safe spaces and open spaces to facilitate dialogue rather than fear

Opportunities

A key theme from the San Diego launch meeting highlighted the need to consider all forms of equity, across race/ethnicity, gender and sexuality, in addressing HIV treatment and prevention, STIs, viral hepatitis and overdose prevention. Broadening engagement of highly impacted communities, especially those with intersecting identities (e.g. people living with HIV that are affected by racism, homelessness, substance use and mental health), is vital. Future efforts in the region will require strategic partnerships with community partners already engaging key populations.

Future action items for SCHPRC include:

- Identifying a cadre of community partners interested in exploring specific policy issues in the San Diego region
- Identifying research partners already engaged in research on topics raised during the session to bring into collaboration
- Developing ongoing relationships to facilitate multi-directional sharing of knowledge between community partners, academic partners and policymakers in the region
- Creating opportunities for stakeholders to engage in capacity building, training and research dissemination activities

Participants were encouraged to stay connected to [SCHPRC](#) and to consider future engagement with the [End the Epidemics](#) statewide coalition.