Black Leadership in Harm Reduction
Community Consultation
Building collective leadership for HIV prevention among Black people impacted by drug use

Why do we need collective Black leadership in Harm Reduction?

We view the ‘War on Drugs’ in the United States as a war on people of color and a severe threat to the health and stability of Black communities in urban areas across the United States. When we look at political attacks on syringe exchange programs, high rates of HIV and hepatitis C infection, punitive drug policies, law enforcement practices, and mandatory minimum sentencing for drug charges, we see that Black people in the United States carry the heaviest burden in health consequences and harms to our communities. We seek to counteract these realities through building a community among Black people who engage in harm reduction work. By harnessing Black leadership, we can map out how harm reduction can most powerfully address drug use and HIV. We want to adopt a racial justice framework grounded in reconciliation, resiliency, and healing that has the ability to address the oppression experienced among Black people.

What is the purpose of this Community Consultation Series?

Our Community Consultation explores a core question in leadership development:
*How does organizational culture shape the development of Black leadership to apply harm reduction in Black communities?*

We know that institutional racism impacts access to opportunities in disadvantaged communities. For instance, we know that African Americans are being incarcerated at a disproportionate rate for drug charges due to punitive drug policies. Today, 1 in 15 African-American children and 1 in 42 Latino children have a parent in prison, compared to 1 in 111 white children.¹ Mass arrests and incarceration of people of color – largely due to drug law violations - have stifled families and communities by stigmatizing and displacing substantial numbers of men and women funneled into jail and prison.

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Many are labeled felons for life, and, as a result, may be prevented from voting and accessing public housing, student loans, and other forms of public assistance.

This consultation explores organization practices and policies that make up the culture of organizations. It addresses how they cause challenges and barriers to decision-making power and leadership opportunities to African Americans involved in participating in the very work that mitigates the harms associated with drug use. Organizational culture is the specific collection of beliefs, values, and norms that are shared by people and groups in an organization that control the way they interact with each other and with stakeholders outside the organization. Each organization’s culture is historically determined, and socially constructed. Assessments of organizational culture are a key tool in capacity-building assistance for determining what kind of leadership exists within organizations.

How can you participate?

Starting in June of 2011 we will conduct surveys, interviews, and focus groups followed by a series of forums nationally to share information and ideas. We are going through this process to explore cultural dynamics which support or inhibit Black leadership in harm reduction. We view our role as facilitator of an open process to generate community-led strategies. In these forums, we intend on answering our core question by creating a space for honest dialogue that collectively confronts the challenges and barriers to Black leadership.

What are the long-term goals and vision?

Our broader goals include:

1. Supporting greater African American leadership opportunities for people who work in the harm reduction field.
2. Articulating a racial justice framework grounded in harm reduction principles that creates the space for collective goal setting and execution of community-led strategies.
3. Developing more effective, empowering and participatory harm reduction strategies for Black people.

In addition, to further dialogues within the Black community, we will produce a themed issue of Harm Reduction Communication, our online magazine, devoted to African Americans, the drug and sex trade, and Harm Reduction. The issue will feature a range of contributors from within the harm reduction community, alongside articles commissioned from a diverse range of well-known Black

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bloggers, journalists, and academics. Contributors will be free to address the issue’s theme from their own perspective: personal, political, cultural, intersectional. Our goal for this publication is to extend dialogues and engagements with harm reduction among diverse Black communities. Our ultimate hope is to lift the voices of Black people who want to engage with the harm reduction model and with each other.

We welcome your questions and suggestions about this concept note. Additionally, we welcome those interested in participating in our CCS. Please feel free to contact:

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Look forward to hearing from you!