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HIV Advisory Body

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July 11, 2019

Johanne Morne, Director
New York State Department of Health AIDS Institute
Empire State Plaza, Corning Tower
Albany, NY 12237

Dear Ms. Morne:

The New York State HIV Advisory Body (HAB) writes this letter in support of the AIDS Institute's efforts to combat new HIV/STI infections in NYS and its focus on initiatives that target youth/young people. HAB members were pleased to learn of current and ongoing initiatives to:

- Update the NYS Sexual Health Plan - a guide to ensure accurate sexual health information and quality health services are made available to all New York State youth.
- Develop and support "Tested" a social marketing campaign for youth through the Digital Health Initiative's YGetIt? (YGI) Project promoting testing and improving health literacy for young adults ages 18-24. This educational comic 'Tested', is defining terms, depicting barriers to care, presenting best practices in prevention and highlighting key sexual health concepts.
- Address rising rates of STIs through the production, distribution and /promotion of comprehensive "sex positive" PSA/public health vignettes and short scenarios on gonorrhea and chlamydia through YGI - *STI Youth Chlamydia* <https://bit.ly/2FRneUM> and *Gonorrhea* <https://bit.ly/2JfcUlj> vignettes.
- Providing training and technical assistance through the AIDS Institutes' Clinical Education Initiative (CEI) for clinical providers Statewide on comprehensive sexual health (risk) assessments based on the NYS DOH AI Clinical Guidelines.
- Formation of the STI and the Young Adults ETE Advisory Groups
- Fund mobile STI services serving rural communities to improve access, reduce barriers to healthcare, promote health equity, and to engage complex and high-risk patients.
- Expand comprehensive sexual health (risk) assessments trainings through CEI to include non-clinical providers such as case managers based on the NYS DOH AI Clinical Guidelines.

The data released from the New York State Department of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reveals continued rise of STI rates among key populations. The data shows increase in STIs have continued for four consecutive years (from 2013-2017). Syphilis cases have nearly doubled, gonorrhea has increased by more than 67%, and chlamydia remains at record highs. Half of all new STIs reported each year come from young people between the ages of 15 to 24. It is also worth noting that within this population, there are disproportionate rates of new infections for young black/brown boys/men.

HAB recognizes and supports the following recommendation for continued support of youth and young adults in accessing and understanding good sexual health:

Increase Youth Engagement

Adolescents and young adults are immersed in a variety of social networking sites; the use of smart phones, and the culture of instant messaging. These type of media influences the development of sexual attitudes and behaviors which impact sexual risk-taking and sexual health.

New York State has taken several proactive steps to support and increase access to sexual health care for young people. Legislation was passed to change the definition of STIs to include HIV. Minors were also given the right to consent to testing, prevention and treatment without parental involvement. The concepts of consent and confidentiality are complex issues to understand. It is important that young people are informed and educated about their rights and empowered to take control of their bodies and sexual health. Health literacy is an important step in moving young people to better health outcomes not only in sexual health but also making healthy choices and understanding the benefits of engaging in health care.

HAB recommends expanding the promotion of youth health literacy by providing information on minor's rights and confidentiality. Information can be disseminated through existing social marketing tools like YGI and the state sponsored Community Based Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program. The messaging should include how to access health services and navigation to youth friendly facilities.

NYS Sexual Health Plan

HAB commends and supports the AI for updating the NYS Sexual Health Plan and offers some recommendations to strengthen the dissemination and implementation of the plans' goals.

1. Continued partnership and collaboration with the NYSED to share and promote the plan, promote comprehensive sexual health education and provide ongoing training for school staff in New York State.
2. In tandem, the NYSDOH guidance on sex education in schools published in 2005, should be revised, holistic and comprehensive curriculum be approved. This curriculum should be inclusive of different gender identities and sexual orientations; reflect changes in language, culture, science, and technology; and incorporate a wide range of approaches to STI prevention and sexual health across the lifespan. Furthermore, educators should be provided with appropriate training and support so that they are knowledgeable in

content, culturally competent, and feel comfortable responding to questions and participating in discussions with students.

3. A partnership with CEI and the NYS Education Department is needed to provide trainings for school-based health clinic staff on STI prevention education and information into existing programs and expand the populations served to include partners and family members.

Support/Training for Providers (Clinical and Non-Clinical)

HIV/STI surveillance data is a resource to inform patients who may self-identify as a person at risk for increased rates of HIV/STI's. Medical providers are primed to offer and provide consistent follow-up of patients who present to their respective practices with an STI contact. Sexual health should be incorporated at all levels of the provision of care.

HAB recommends that the AI

1. Continue to disseminate dear colleague letters from the NYS Commissioner of Health on state-wide surveillance data from the New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH), for the three major STIs in New York State: syphilis, gonorrhea, and chlamydia.
2. Promote and share Let's Talk About Sexual Health - a sexual health/youth focused medical provider tool kit developed by the CDC to assist providers in taking a comprehensive, sex positive, youth friendly sexual history and creating safe spaces that are youth friendly. <https://www.cdc.gov/std/be-smart-be-well/letstalk.htm>
3. Develop and disseminate a joint dear colleague letter from the director of the Bureau of Sexual Health & Epidemiology and the Office of the Medical Director (OMD), in partnership with County Health Departments to all medical providers in New York State informing them that STI diagnoses in recent years have continued to increase in young people, non-Hispanic black individuals, and men who have sex with men (MSM).
4. Market and continue to provide trainings and regional STI updates through regional training centers for medical schools and schools of public health to ensure educational learning opportunities for clinical providers in NYS.
5. Provide technical assistance to Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) on the nuances of STI health care provision, such as clinical workflows, patients recruitment, and the implications of Uniform Data System (UDS) reporting for a subset of a patient population, among other issues. Additionally, health centers could benefit from technical assistance in creating marketing campaigns, for everything from adolescent screening campaigns to using social media to reduce stigma.
6. All AI funded programs and services should have a plan to promote this effort, including strategies on how programs and services can work together, streamline services and maximize outcomes and results.

STI Testing

The HIV Guidelines includes standards and guidance for STI screening to ensure that no matter what area of the State a clinic operates, there is consistency in screening protocols. The guidelines have helped improve access to rapid screening and treatment for STIs, such as gonorrhea and chlamydia, has the potential to increase testing rates, and catch asymptomatic individuals that would otherwise neither seek treatment nor be aware of their infection

HAB recommends expansion of Expedited Partner Therapy (EPT) Statewide to all individuals that need it and continued promotion and education on 3-site chlamydia and gonorrhea screening to clinical partners.

Consumer Education

Patient and consumer education are essential to achieving greater health outcomes. Information on STIs that is timely, transparent and responsive should be made available via social media, in print and online.

The HAB recommends such materials developed be made available through online platforms and using existing websites, social media and marketing campaigns.

We thank you for your support in addressing STIs utilizing a sex positive approach. We look forward to continued conversations as the AI reviews and implements these recommendations as well as those from the STI and young adult advisory groups.

Sincerely,

Vaughn Taylor-Akutagawa
Community Co-Chair

Justin Toro
Community Co-Chair