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## New York City HIV Testing Initiatives

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Fieldwork Summary Report

New York City HIV Testing Initiatives: Data, Evaluation and Community Engagement

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### **Abstract**

My culminating fieldwork experience took place at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene's Health Research Training Program where I completed over 300 hours of practical experience in working with the HIV Diagnostics Unit in the Bureau of HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control. While my work focused on a variety of public health interventions, for the purpose of my final paper, I have chosen to detail my work on the application of data analysis, program planning/evaluation, and community engagement in the New York City HIV Testing Initiatives Program. The USF MPH Program coursework and commitment to social justice has honed my skills and equipped me to apply theory into practice through this culminating experience. This fieldwork placement provided an excellent opportunity to demonstrate the core competencies and interdisciplinary competencies of public health that I have learned. Furthermore, this experience reflects the continuous development of my expertise in specific areas of interest and growth in the field of public health, specifically in working with urban underserved populations and with the prevention and control of HIV/AIDS. This Fieldwork Summary Report will provide an overview of the main projects that I worked on, the methods and theory used in implementation, the results and public health significance, and the competencies addressed. Additionally, you will find a brief summary of my overall experience at NYC DOHMH, and the various seminars, workshops, community events, and other activities I had a chance to attend while living in New York City.

### New York City HIV Testing Initiatives: Data, Evaluation and Community Engagement

For my culminating experience for the University of San Francisco's (USF) Master of Public Health (MPH) Program, I was selected to intern at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (NYC DOHMH). NYC DOHMH is unique from many of its local health department counterparts in other cities in the United States as it protects the public health of over 8.3 million city residents. It works in conjunction with the NYC Board of Health and together they serve the five boroughs of New York City: Manhattan, Brooklyn, Bronx, Queens and Staten Island. For over 200 years, NYC DOHMH and NYC Board of Health have been committed to public health leadership implementing model programs to fight new and re-emerging infectious diseases as well as launching programs that prevent and control some of the major chronic diseases (NYC DOHMH, 2005). More recently, upon appointment of Dr. Mary Bassett as Commissioner of Health, NYC DOHMH also took on the responsibility of promoting health equity in every aspect of its work in the city.

I began my internship through NYC DOHMH's Health Research Training Program (H RTP). H RTP: A Public Health Internship Program at the NYC DOHMH is one of the oldest and largest public health traineeships in the country (NYC DOHMH, 2014). For over 50 years, H RTP has provided the opportunity for undergraduate, graduate and professional school students to experience some of the "real life" challenges of public health. By working on current relevant public health issues under the close supervision and mentorship of experienced professionals, students apply classroom learning to practical problems in a closely matched practicum and, in the process, learn critical skills needed to excel in the field (NYC DOHMH, 2014). In addition, H RTP provides a rigorous curriculum during the summer that includes seminars, workshops, and

other activities that help broaden the interns' understanding of how NYC DOHMH works and functions in promoting the health of New Yorkers.

My position as an HRTP intern focused on working with the Bureau of HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control's (BHIV) HIV Diagnostics Unit. I was selected to be the Data and Evaluation intern for the *Knows Team*, the group that works on NYC DOHMH's Expanded HIV Testing Initiatives Programs. Expanded HIV Testing Initiative (ETI) was established by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the early 2000s as a critical strategy to increase awareness of HIV status (CDC, 2013). This initiative plays an important contribution in public health because increasing the number of persons who are aware of their status is a critical strategy for preventing HIV infections (Cohen et al, 2008). Having the Knows Team puts NYC DOHMH at the forefront of public health leadership by being one of the first cities to join the CDC Initiative (CDC, 2013). In addition, the Knows Team works to stay consistent with the goals of ETI and the mission of BHIV, "to prevent new HIV infections and reduce the mortality and morbidity among HIV affected persons" (Wilkins, 2014) by promoting NYC's Jurisdictional HIV Testing Initiatives.

The 2012 surveillance data on the HIV epidemic in NYC highlights a range of important aspects of HIV/AIDS in NYC, as well as the major activities of the HIV Surveillance Unit at the NYC DOHMH (NYC DOHMH, 2013). The report reflects the shift in HIV burden to a chronic manageable disease although NYC continues to have one of the largest HIV epidemics in the United States (NYC DOHMH, 2013). With new HIV and AIDS diagnoses, incident HIV infections, perinatal infections, and deaths among persons with HIV declining, and the number of persons living with HIV growing, there is a need to further promote HIV status awareness.

The first jurisdictional HIV testing initiative launched in NYC in 2008 is *The Bronx Knows* with the goal of making every Bronx resident aware of his or her status. NYC DOHMH led the initiative together with 78 community partners. It was no coincidence that the Bronx was chosen to be the first target borough because data shows the interconnection of HIV prevalence, HIV diagnosis rates, as well as health disparities and poverty in this area of NYC. The Bronx Knows Initiative concluded in 2011 with more than twice the number of tests conducted than the goal (Cutler, 2013). Today, the Bronx Knows initiative continues the goals and mission of ETI but as a solely community led initiative with NYC DOHMH technical assistance from time to time. The community capacity building focus that NYC DOHMH worked on throughout the Bronx Knows initiative years has greatly contributed to its continued success.

Continuing with the great momentum that the Bronx Knows had, *Brooklyn Knows* was launched on World AIDS Day 2010. Brooklyn much like the Bronx had disproportionate rates in HIV/AIDS and presented to be as another borough with greater health and access needs. For this reason, the second HIV Testing Initiative was conducted there. Brooklyn Knows is set to conclude in December 2014. For both Bronx Knows and Brooklyn Knows initiatives, community partners report quarterly on five basic indicators to NYC DOHMH:

1. Number of HIV tests conducted
2. Number of confirmed positive HIV tests
3. Number positives linked to care
4. Number confirmed newly diagnosed positives
5. Number newly diagnosed positives linked to care

In addition, the Knows team working as NYC Health Department's arm in ETI contributes to promoting awareness of HIV status by providing the following services:

1. Leadership - DOHMH and Community Led initiative
2. HIV rapid test kits—for uninsured
3. Technical assistance
4. Borough-wide social marketing/media
5. Testing event support
6. Training on web-based reporting system
7. HIV billing and reimbursement tutorial
8. Activity coordination

As the Brooklyn Knows Initiative is starting to come to a close, the Knows Team is also in the process of planning a large-scale citywide HIV Testing Initiative which will be called *New York Knows*. This initiative will use the same model as the previous two initiatives and will be heavily dependent on community engagement and partnership building. With NYC DOHMH's commitment to reducing health disparities it is imperative that the Knows Team continue to work on increasing awareness of HIV status and increase HIV testing awareness to make it part of routine medical care. Therefore establishment of New York Knows will go in line with this agency-wide goal.

#### Contributions as Data and Evaluation Intern

As the Data and Evaluation intern for the Knows Team, my specific contributions to the HIV Testing Initiatives focused on three main projects: 1) National HIV Testing Day (NHTD) Evaluation; 2) Data Analysis; and 3) Program Planning and Evaluation. Although I was not a "Community Engagement" intern by title, I was still involved in many of the community capacity building activities that the Knows Team participated in, including various planning for HIV/AIDS Awareness days, provider trainings, and community events.

During the first two weeks of my internship, I worked with the Knows Team in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the NHTD events held throughout NYC. Specifically, I was involved in 2 main projects concerning NHTD: 1) Social Media Campaign and 2) Health Fair Evaluation. Using the evaluation skills gained and online resources I've learned from the Program Planning, Management and Evaluation course I had at USF, I created an evaluation tool/ survey for the NHTD Social Media Campaign (see Appendix). This survey was distributed amongst the Knows Team testing partners at the events and was to be administered to every individual tested at each of the events. For the week of NHTD, NYC DOHMH advertised community partner testing sites in different social media platforms including Tumblr, Facebook, Grindr and Scruff. The survey then asks those tested individuals if they found out about the HIV testing site through any of the social media platforms that NYC DOHMH advertised the sites. In addition, demographic information was also obtained from the tested individuals. The data we gathered from this evaluation was preliminary data from only 7 out of the 21 testing partners for that week of NHTD events. Some of the limitations that contributed to this low response rate is the fact that this is an innovative intervention that has not been implemented by NYC DOHMH before and has never been evaluated. Being so, it was difficult to find baseline values to compare to as well as best practices for planning, implementing, and evaluating any HIV Testing Social Media Campaign. Upon the conclusion of my internship, the Knows Team is continuously working on finding ways to make this evaluation more sound and easier to apply for future events. In addition to the Social Media Campaign, I also helped in the Health Fair Evaluation for NHTD. On June 26, 2014, the Knows Team conducted a health fair in Albee Square in Brooklyn to increase HIV awareness and to be able to provide free HIV testing. My specific contribution to this event was administering a



survey to event attendees in order to evaluate how much interest New Yorkers have in HIV and HIV testing and what attracts them to these events. After the event it was also my responsibility to collect, analyze, and report all data gathered. Although the NHTD events were only for one week, the continuous data collection and analysis for the above two projects was essential in gaining a better understanding of these interventions, and their effectiveness in HIV Testing Initiatives. Similarly, my contribution in the continuous data collection, clean-up, matching and consolidation of the 5 basic indicators reported for both Bronx Knows and Brooklyn Knows is also essential for future assessment of NYC HIV Testing Initiatives program efficiency. In terms of Program Planning and Evaluation, my work involved the formative evaluation of New York Knows. I drafted the initial Logic Model (see Appendix) for the Monitoring and Evaluation Plan. Additionally, I helped create the Social Media Plans for two upcoming awareness days: National Gay Men's HIV/AIDS Awareness Days and National Latino AIDS Awareness Day.

My work with the Knows Team addressed the following USF competencies:

1. Assess, monitor, and review the health status of populations and their related determinants of health and illness.
2. Demonstrate the ability to utilize the proper statistical and epidemiologic tools to assess community needs and program outcomes.
3. Identify and prioritize the key dimensions of a public health problem by critically assessing public health literature utilizing both quantitative and qualitative sources.
4. Demonstrate leadership abilities as collaborators and coordinators of evidence based public health projects.
5. Identify and apply ethical, moral, and legal principles in all aspects of public health practice.

6. Apply theoretical constructs of social change, health behavior and social justice in planning community interventions.

Additionally, this work touched on the Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH) biostatistics and epidemiology competencies as well as the communication and informatics and program planning interdisciplinary values defined by the Association of Schools of Public Health (ASPH). This project was an excellent part of my fieldwork experience, allowing me to successfully use competencies gained throughout the MPH program in a way that will significantly impact the field of HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control.

#### Extracurricular Activities

Being an H RTP intern with DOHMH was such an invaluable experience because each H RTP intern is automatically required to attend a weekly seminar with each week focusing on a different project/program/bureau of the NYC Health Department. I was able to understand the advantages of being part of an organization that is innovative and a great leader in the field of public health. The seminars I have attended included topics about School Health, the Rat Indexing GIS project of NYC, Intergovernmental Affairs, Take Care New York Initiative, Obesity and Chronic Disease Interventions in NYC, Emergency Preparedness, and the Primary Care Information Program. Although the topics vary one of the common denominators of all presentations lay on the overarching commitment of NYC DOHMH to promote health equity and reduce health disparities. In addition to these seminars, I was also able to attend workshops on grant writing, program evaluation and the Youth Behavioral Risk Survey that NYC conducts. I was also fortunate to visit NYC's Public Health Laboratory and see first-hand how lab technicians' work play an important role in protecting the city's public health. These

extracurricular activities definitely enriched my public health knowledge and reinforced what I have already learned from the classroom and in the field.

Throughout my graduate education at USF, my coursework provided me the opportunity to gain expertise in so many diverse skill sets that I have been able to directly apply to my work in the Bureau of HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control at NYC DOHMH. While the core Epidemiology course provided the basis for my understanding of the dimensions of HIV/AIDS, applications of the skills learned from the Program Planning and Evaluation course provided me the ability to complete my internship tasks. The completion of other courses such as Communicating for Healthy Behavior and Social Change, Sexual Health and Public Health Leadership and Administration further enhanced my ability to be mindful of those that are affected by health disparities and to always seek out to build community capacity. Lastly, lessons I learned from the Social Justice, Health Policy and Public Health Law course helped me during my entire fieldwork experience, helping me understand the importance of different values clarification while providing me with a strong understanding of the important role that government agencies such as the NYC Health Department has in addressing public health issues. Furthermore, my experience working on the NYC HIV Testing Initiatives provided me with a glimpse of what contributions working from a top-down approach in public health results in. It has given me a better idea of using many different and innovative interventions in terms of data, evaluation and community engagement.

Completing my fieldwork requirement at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene was an amazing experience, and I am so grateful to have been given this opportunity to be an HRTP intern. While working on numerous projects was overwhelming at times, looking back on this experience, I am so appreciative for the knowledge I was able to gain

from the Knows Team. The whole experience has reinforced my passion for service, my commitment to social justice, and my desire to continue to work with the underserved especially in urban environments. Additionally, this experience has allowed me to continue to work with my interest in HIV/AIDS Prevention and also further advance my skills in HIV work. As I graduate from the MPH program, I look forward to utilizing the skills I have gained throughout my education and during my fieldwork placement, as I pursue career opportunities within the field of public health and specifically in program evaluation, harm reduction and community engagement.

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