STATEMENT OF POLICY

**Use of the Internet and Other Technologies for STI/HIV Prevention and
Intervention Activities**

Policy

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) supports the use of the Internet and other technologies, such as mobile phones, for STI/HIV prevention and intervention activities.

NACCHO urges local health departments (LHDs) to:

- Work with local governments to amend or repeal existing structural barriers to using the Internet and other technologies for STI/HIV prevention and intervention activities;
- Establish clearly written policies and procedures for the appropriate use of the Internet and other technologies for STI/HIV prevention and intervention activities, including standards to ensure confidentiality and compliance with state/local laws;
- Provide appropriate training and resources to STI/HIV disease intervention staff, so that they may effectively and appropriately use the Internet and other technologies for STI/HIV prevention and intervention activities; and
- Develop and disseminate field-tested practices, policies, and guidelines for using the Internet and other technologies for STI/HIV prevention and intervention activities.

Justification

Current and emerging technologies (including e-mail, text messaging, social networking sites, chat rooms, and blogs) are valuable tools for information gathering, message dissemination, and direct communication with both individuals and targeted high-risk communities. However, some jurisdictions and governmental agencies have laws, statutes, regulations, rules, policies, and procedures that restrict access to and/or the effective use of the Internet and other technologies. Such restrictions were originally implemented to prevent inappropriate use of public resources and to address privacy concerns but have become barriers to effective STI/HIV prevention and intervention activities as current and emerging technologies have changed the way people communicate, meet, and seek information.

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV, continue to pose a significant disease burden in the United States.[1,2] Sexual contact is the primary means of transmission of these diseases and the Internet and other technologies are increasingly used as mechanisms for persons to find and meet sex partners and access and receive health information.[3,4] Furthermore, an increasing number of Americans are now reachable only through wireless mobile devices and research has shown that 74 percent of all U.S. adults use the Internet.[5,6] As these new mechanisms are adopted by the general public, they must also be adopted and used by public health as tools for STI/HIV prevention and intervention activities.[7]

Through case studies, field experiences, and research studies, the Internet and other technologies have been shown to be useful for augmenting STI/HIV prevention and intervention activities, including provision of test results, partner services, and health communication. Alternative communication techniques to the standard telephone or U.S. Mail (namely e-mail, text messaging, and messages sent through social networking sites) are very effective for reaching particular demographic groups.[8,9] Additionally, since identifying information such as name, address, and phone number may not be known by Internet-based sex partners, the only information an infected person may know about their sex partners is related to the way they met through the Internet, such as screen name, e-mail address, or other Internet alias.[10] Therefore, Internet-based partner notification (using the Internet to conduct or enhance the process of notifying a person of their potential exposure to an infectious disease) can be a critical tool for disease intervention staff at LHDs.

The Internet and other technologies, namely mobile phones, can also be used by LHDs to reach individuals regarding test results, appointment reminders, and communication of sexual health information. Text messaging has been shown to have the capacity to improve services and increase knowledge and understanding of STIs and HIV[11] and has many benefits over other modes of communication, including being low cost, easy and convenient, highly accessible, and popular.[12,13]

Similar to conducting "traditional" partner services and providing test results, legal authority, confidentiality, and ethics must be considered and addressed in the policies and procedures developed for the use of the Internet and other technologies. Policies and procedures should adhere to standards of confidentiality and ethics and be in compliance with state/local laws, regulations, and statutes, including the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). The HIPAA Privacy Rule allows protected health information to be disclosed by those public health authorities who are mandated to notify individuals of their potential exposure to a communicable disease in an effort to prevent further spread of disease during the course of a public health investigation. Prior to beginning Internet-based partner services, LHDs should review which STIs fall under this rule.[14]

The Internet and other technologies have also been shown to be useful for communicating disease prevention and health promotion messages. A recent report by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 80 percent of Internet users have looked online for health information, highlighting the importance of public health using this modality for message dissemination.[15] Currently, a broad range of Internet-based prevention interventions exist, including educational websites, individual online outreach, banner advertisements, chats, message boards, and site-specific warning messages. An evaluation of Internet-based prevention interventions in San Francisco concluded that "it is imperative that disease control agencies and prevention organizations capitalize on the potential of the Internet to provide information, education, and referrals to resources not easily available or not routinely accessed" through more traditional modalities.[16] A systematic review and meta-analysis of computer- and Internet-based STI/HIV interventions conducted through 2008 found effect sizes similar to human-delivered interventions for condom use, partner numbers, and incident STIs.[17] While intervention intensity and exposure remain challenges (as they also do with human-delivered interventions), Internet-based prevention interventions have been shown to be feasible, acceptable, and efficacious for consumers and providers.[18]

The Internet and other technologies are "powerful mediums for communication" and valuable tools for facilitating STI/HIV prevention and intervention activities.[19] Preventing the use of these tools for public health practice prevents public health from keeping in step with social change and providing the most effective and efficient disease intervention. Some national organizations, state health departments, and LHDs have already

developed and implemented policies/guidelines for the use of the Internet and other technologies for STI/HIV prevention and intervention activities.[20,21,22] In particular, the National Coalition of STD Directors developed comprehensive national guidelines for Internet-based partner notification, Internet outreach, and health communications.[23] Developing policies and procedures that allow for the use of the Internet and other technologies in their STI/HIV prevention and intervention work will be beneficial to LHDs.

Record of Action
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