



**National Guidelines for Internet-based  
STD and HIV Prevention:  
Accessing the Power of the Internet for Public  
Health**

**Guidelines for Internet-based Partner Notification**

**Guidelines for Internet Outreach**

**Guidelines for Health Communications**

March 2008

## Executive Summary

*Accessing the Power of the Internet for Public Health: Guidelines for Internet-based STD/HIV Prevention*, hereafter referred to as *The Guidelines*, is a user-friendly document developed to aid health departments and community-based nonprofit organizations use the Internet as a tool for the control and prevention of STDs including HIV. *The Guidelines* focus on three distinct types of Internet activities: Internet-based Partner Services (IPS), Outreach, and Health Communications. These three activities were chosen based on their current use in the field (IPS), and the overarching nature for which other online activities derive (Outreach and Health Communications). While IPS is a discrete interaction with a trained Internet-Disease Intervention Specialist, STD/HIV outreach and health communication activities carried out online are intended to be broad reaching.

### **Internet-based Partner Services (IPS)**

Rooted in traditional Partner Notification, IPN is the process of using the Internet to conduct or enhance the method of notifying a person of their potential exposure to an infectious disease. As trends in sex-seeking opportunities adapt to new technological advances, IPN is particularly useful in contacting individuals that may otherwise be unreachable except for screen names, e-mail addresses, or other Internet aliases. Measures to ensure confidentiality, ethics, and computer security are essential precursors to conducting IPN. *The Guidelines* present several issues, and possible solutions, to consider prior to attempting IPN.

It should be noted that *The Guidelines* have adopted the term *partner services* as a replacement for the term *partner notification*. This was done for two reasons. Foremost, the term partner services encompasses a broader definition, one that captures the broad array of services being offered beyond partner notification, such as the provision of referrals, follow-up, testing for other STDs including HIV, vaccination for hepatitis, etc. Additionally, the term is being used so that this document is consistent with the new, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) partner services document, which integrates guidelines for partner services for HIV and other STDs into a single set of recommendations and replaces the CDC's 1998 *HIV Partner Counseling and Referral Services Guidance* and the Partner Services module of the 2001 *Program Operations Guidelines for STD Prevention*.

### **Internet-based Outreach**

Careful observation of the culture of the online community is crucial for online outreach. Each Internet community may have different clientele with unique STD/HIV risk behaviors, or varying standards for permitting health educators and health messages on their website or online community. As such, it is important to create guidelines for online outreach specific to your individual program or agency to ensure consistency in approach. *The Guidelines* offers tips on creating an online identity and suggests elements to be included in your program or agency-specific guidelines.

## Health Communications

STD/HIV-related health communications on the Internet should be a complementary activity to IPS and outreach. At the very least, every program or agency needs to have a website. The passive health-information seeker may be more inclined to view health information on a website than to engage in dialogue with an actual person from a health department or community-based organization, either in person or online. Having a well-developed website for your program or agency can also add credibility to other online activities, such as IPN and outreach. In addition to tips on developing a website, *The Guidelines* highlight traditional health communications tools, such as banner ads, and expands to include emerging technologies to be considered, such as mobile devices and audio/video. *The Guidelines* also provides examples of how these tools can be translated for use in a virtual environment.

The virtual environment is fluid, constantly shifting, and changing. Websites popular today may lose their core audience and become cliché tomorrow. However, equipped with the basic elements outlined in *The Guidelines*, your program or agency will have the necessary skills to remain relevant in the realm of Internet-based STD/HIV prevention activities.

### SUGGESTED CITATION:

National Coalition of STD Directors. (2008, March). National Guidelines for Internet-based STD and HIV Prevention: Accessing the Power of the Internet for Public Health. Washington, DC: Author.

Should you need help or more information regarding any section of the guidelines, please contact NCSD at (202) 842-4660 or [kmayor@ncsddc.org](mailto:kmayor@ncsddc.org).

## **Introduction**

### Background

Access to the Internet is ubiquitous in the United States and research has shown it to have an impact on sexually transmitted disease (STD) transmission. As the use of the Internet and other technologies continues to grow, many program areas turned to the National Coalition of STD Directors (NCSD) and the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) for guidance on how to use the Internet as a tool for the control and prevention of STDs including HIV.

Because of these requests for direction, an effort was initiated to bring together all those who are conducting STD prevention online to create guidance based on their successes and their mistakes. In acknowledging their collective knowledge and experience, the wheel was not reinvented but rather a document was created that will help other programs initiate and conduct successful Internet efforts and avoid common mistakes.

### Objectives

In creating this document, NCSD, CDC, and its many partners had two objectives. First, this is an important, initial effort to document what is known nationally about promising practices for using the Internet for the control and prevention of STDs. Second, this is an important first effort to establish a baseline of operating procedures that will help assure consistency in the quality of services and management of risk related to these services. The aim is to create a useful and user-friendly document that is helpful to state public health departments and community-based nonprofit organizations that want to begin using the Internet or want to expand or improve their current Internet efforts.

### Levels of Guidance

Because the use of the Internet for the control and prevention of STDs is still new, there is a limited amount of evidence to suggest any one approach or procedure is better than any other. Every organization using the Internet is having different degrees of success and, as far as we know, continuing to learn and adapt approaches as needed.

The guidelines included in this document represent two levels of practice. We chose these levels because we believe we have enough experience in some areas to recommend preferred practices. In other areas, there are too many options to choose from and still more options being created all the time.

- **Framework Level:** Preferred practice for the way to approach something; lays a foundation based on good experience. This level applies to the guidelines included for Internet Partner Services and Internet Outreach.

- Recommendation Level: Optional practices based on initial exploration or experience; a place to begin from or move toward. This level applies to the guidelines included for Health Communications on the Internet.

### Guidelines Development Process

A work group led by NCSD and the CDC's Division of STD Prevention (DSTD) planned and coordinated the guideline development process. The content for these guidelines was developed with the participation and input of a wide range of professionals who work in STD and HIV control and prevention across the United States. Stakeholders with various levels of Internet-based STD/HIV prevention knowledge and experience were invited to the table in order to ensure that the document was written for a broad audience in the most comprehensive and cohesive way. Invitees represented those programs with the most experience and expertise in this field, those programs that wanted to develop and implement their own programs but did not know where to begin, and those programs with little or no knowledge of and/or experience with the Internet and how it could be used as a prevention tool. Approximately 30 invitees from 20 different jurisdictions participated in a 3-day meeting in Washington DC, June 27-29, 2006. The focus of the initial meeting was to develop the key concepts, approaches, practices, and procedures that would be included in the guidelines. Following the preliminary meeting, participants convened in small working groups to further develop the detailed content for the guidelines. Protocols were outlined and developed and a smaller group of participants was reconvened in Washington DC for two days, January 10-11, 2007, to fill in gaps, make additional decisions, and outline future steps. Finally, various contributors spent countless hours writing, compiling, and editing the documents. Draft versions of the documents were shared with programs with little or no Internet-based prevention experience for comments and feedback. Responses from the programs were incorporated when applicable and possible. This is a living document that was put through a rigorous review by a medical editor. Prior to the release of the final document it will be vetted to staff in the Office of the Director of the Division of STD Prevention at the CDC and approved by the Board of the National Coalition of STD Directors. What you have before you is the incredible work of many dedicated individuals.

The completed guidelines are the property of NCSD. NCSD will make them available through its website and is committed to updating them regularly, based on lessons learned and as new information about the Internet and other technologies emerge. Questions about the guidelines and the process by which they were created should be directed to NCSD.

## **Acknowledgements**

### **Guidelines for Internet-based STD/HIV Prevention, 2007**

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