

Escalating Prevention Efforts for MSM HIV Infection Through a Special Project Fund

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Issue: Increasing trend of reported local HIV/AIDS cases and HIV sero-prevalence among Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSM) in Hong Kong since 2006, and the HIV projection by a consultancy study pointing out that the trend would continue, or even accelerate, if unchecked.

Project: The AIDS Trust Fund was established in 1993 to provide assistance to HIV-infected haemophiliacs and generally to strengthen medical and support services and public education on AIDS in Hong Kong. In view of the epidemiological evidence showing an escalating HIV epidemic in MSM and based on recommendations by the Advisory Council on AIDS, the Council for AIDS Trust Fund established a Special Project Fund (SPF) for 2 financial years, 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 as an enhanced HIV preventive measure and supported community based prevention activities with objectives to reduce HIV risk behaviour and to increase condom use level in anal sex among MSM.

Proposals for projects in three categories were invited and could be either prevention projects with objectives which had been predefined by SPF; projects with preferred project areas, or public health research projects. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academic institutes and service providers in the public sector were among the organizations which could apply.

Result: Altogether more than HKD 13 million had been awarded to 41 projects. Projects being supported had covered a wide range of areas and included researches, HIV prevention and health promotion projects as well as capacity building initiatives.

Research projects included those on prevalence of risky sexual behaviour and related factors such as socio-demographic background, socio-contextual factors and recreational drug abuse; HIV testing behaviour and facilitators or barriers to HIV testing; risky sexual behaviour of various subgroups e.g. male sex workers and their clients, cross border travelers to Shenzhen, China and MSM attending sex parties; and mapping of MSM venues which provide opportunities for sexual activity. These research initiatives had provided important data for formulating HIV prevention strategies and informing targeted prevention activities.

HIV prevention and promotion projects aimed to increase HIV awareness, enhance HIV risk perception, promote safer sex and HIV testing among MSM in general, or various targeted MSM subgroups such as youth and the newly come outs, sex workers and their clients, sex party goers, cross-border travellers to Shenzhen, recreational drug abusers and people living with HIV. Outreach of these projects was delivered at various settings such as venues frequented by MSM and internet-based settings such as chat rooms, personal networking sites or bulletin board systems (BBS).

Capacity building initiatives aimed to raise the self esteem and positive self-perception of MSM and empower them to adopt and negotiate safer sex practice, strengthen the capacity of front line workers in various areas such as counseling and peer education.

The establishment of the SPF had resulted in the enrichment and enhancement of Hong Kong's response to the HIV epidemic in MSM, both in terms of number of projects undertaken to serve the MSM community as well as diversified nature of those projects. Before the establishment of SPF, there were relatively few NGOs which had experiences in work related to HIV prevention in MSM. Only two main NGOs had undertaken prevention projects targeting MSM and both were exclusively HIV/AIDS orientated. Strategic funding by SPF and enhanced capacity building initiatives and technical support provided by the Department of Health had succeeded in attracting and accelerating the participation of other NGOs previously not experienced in HIV prevention and health promotion targeting MSM, with the number of participating NGOs increasing to eight, representing almost a four-fold increase.

Lessons learned: Strategic funding is instrumental in tapping into the community resources which are important and indispensable sources for innovative ideas and approaches much needed in targeted HIV prevention in MSM, the success of which would require the concerted efforts of various stakeholders within the community.