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**San Mateo County Pride Center’s
Guide to Using Destigmatizing Language in Health Communication Messaging:
Lessons Learned from 40 Years in Combatting HIV Stigma
September 2022**

Key Takeaway Messages:

- Address behaviors vs. people
- Prioritize resources for communities most in need including those practicing high-risk behaviors
- Communicate factual information in accessible languages and formats

Known: Transmission of a communicable disease can only occur when at least one person is positive for that disease.

HIV Messaging Example:

Known: Condomless sex can transmit HIV if one sexual partner is HIV+ with a [high viral load](#).

Known: All populations can participate in condomless sex.

Known: Men who have sex with men* (MSM) are more at risk of acquiring HIV than their heterosexual counterparts because gay male populations statistically have a higher percentage of HIV+ cases.

Known: More stigma and judgement are placed towards gay men and MSM individuals because they “should know better” due to the risks of acquiring HIV despite the fact that all populations might engage in condomless sex. Less judgement may occur against heterosexuals for the same behavior because they’re not reflected in larger number of HIV+ cases. Yet, this fact is only due to their less likelihood of being exposed to HIV statistically.

Problematic words or phrase	Preferred word or phrase
High(er) risk-group(s) Groups with high-risk behavior	High-risk behavior Highly affected communities Key populations Key populations at higher risk
Why: These terms that membership in a particular group can result in an HIV-positive diagnosis. They may also provide a false sense of security to those who do not self-identify with one of these groups.	

Source: [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

Further explanation: The language shifts above places **emphasis on the risks and behaviors** that may cause transmission **rather than the population or people**. This distinction helps alleviate the unintended stigma on communities who may already being experiencing fear and worry about what you are trying to raise awareness about. The problematic phrases also focus the priority on the people rather than the risks for transmission which may lead to individuals mistakenly believing this issue does not apply to them.

Example of destigmatizing educational messaging:

Many communities may practice condomless sex (other behavior) and men who have sex with men (MSM) are disproportionately at higher risk for acquiring HIV. We encourage MSM individuals and those who practice higher risk behavior to stay informed, get tested when appropriate, and know where your local resources are. For more information, click this link or call XXX-XXX-XXXX.

What are the lessons learned?

1. Promote general awareness about transmission factors, signs and symptoms of the disease/illness/etc. and which areas and/or demographics are most impacted. Use messaging which emphasizes high-risk behaviors for transmission rather than focusing solely on populations/people that may be more vulnerable to being exposed.
2. If treatment options are limited, encourage key populations including those practicing most at-risk behaviors to access limited resources first. Strategically, often these categories are chosen first to curb to the risk of increased positive cases.
3. List resources with locations, make clear, and offer in variety of formats, ex. links, written phone numbers, emails, and websites. Keep in mind various audiences such as Older Adults, ESL, multiple languages, lower literacy, and those without access to technology.

Example of destigmatizing educational messaging relevant to M -Pox/MPX (previously referred to as “monkeypox”):

In further efforts to reduce the stigma associated with this virus, monkeypox will be referred to as “m-pox” moving forward. Health organizations will rename m-pox soon. This is similar to the language shift that we saw when “Coronavirus” changed to “COVID-19” or “COVID.”

M-pox can be transmitted in the following ways:

- *List methods of transmission with person **positive** with m-pox*

Individuals who engage in high-risk behaviors are encouraged to read the information compiled here, stay informed and be aware of your own risk factors. Currently, MSM populations are also overrepresented in the number of positive m-pox reported cases. If you are MSM or participate in high-risk behaviors, we encourage you to get tested and/or find out where you can get vaccines in your local areas.

*Remember, there is no such thing as a “Gay Disease.”
We can prevent the transmission of m-pox **together**.*

**MSM - MSM is used to distinguish between behavior and identity. Not everyone who has sex with men identifies as gay. Pleasure can be different than identity. Visit <https://www.cdc.gov/std/treatment-guidelines/msm.htm> for more information about MSM populations.*