

## Key Considerations for Developing a Dear Colleague Letter During a Cluster Response

Evaluating and responding to HIV transmission clusters requires collaboration and communication with external partners and stakeholders. Having a communication plan in place before cluster detection and response activities begin can help facilitate the cluster response process.

It is important to proactively engage with these key partners and stakeholders to share important public health information and protocols. These partners and stakeholders can help amplify important prevention messages to key audiences or they may be in a position to directly interrupt the transmission chain. Their informed understanding will also help build community-wide support and buy-in for cluster response activities.

When communicating information about an HIV response to partners and stakeholders, explore questions such as:

- What do you want to accomplish through the dear colleague letter?
- Are there other communications activities that could be complementary (i.e. press release or health alert)?
- What messages do you want to communicate through a dear colleague letter, and to which audiences?
- What questions can be anticipated and what are the answers to those questions?
- How can sensationalism and misinformation be prevented?
- How can messages avoid stigmatizing communities and populations?
- Will updates be provided throughout the response and on what schedule?
- Who from the health department should be the point of contact?
- Which partners or stakeholders can best impact the success of the response?
- Should partners and stakeholders be aware of the response before they hear about it in the news media?

### Developing Dear Colleague Letter Messages

Though every response is different, some general considerations may be helpful when messages are being developed. These include:

- **Descriptions and characterizations.** A “cluster” is a group of infections that have been determined to be related. If cases have not been determined to be linked using laboratory or epidemiologic data, a more accurate description of the situation, for example, could be: “... examining an increase in HIV diagnoses in the area” or “...examining a group of potentially related infections.”
- **Language.** Avoid internal acronyms or jargon and overly technical terminology. Consider using words and phrases that will be understood by your audience. Be conscious of language that could be unintentionally stigmatizing.
- **Scale.** Clearly define the geographic area(s) of concern, as well as the affected population(s).
- **Epidemiologic data.** Provide a summary of the most recent data, details of the current situation, and what can be said about why increased transmission is occurring.

- **Public health response.** Describe how the situation was identified and actions that state and local public health officials are taking to determine why HIV transmission is occurring and to prevent further transmission. Given that not all clusters are of equal public health concern, it will be important for you to put the situation in the proper context.
- **Call to action.** Partners and stakeholders should understand what role they can play in a cluster response and any steps they can take to interrupt the transmission chain. Provide specific actions, ensuring those actions are based on appropriate state and Federal public health guidelines and recommendations. They should also be encouraged to recognize the unintentional impact language and policies can have on already marginalized populations. It is critical that any call to action contain language that empowers communities, not stigmatizes them.
- **Follow-up.** Show appreciation for any asks you are making of partners and stakeholders. Assure them that they will be kept informed of any change in the response and progress made.