

## Key Considerations for Developing a Health Alert During a Cluster Response

Evaluating and responding to HIV transmission clusters requires collaboration and communication with local public health practitioners, including clinicians, laboratorians, pharmacists, and HIV community-based service providers. 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 public health partners, explore questions such as:

- What do you want to accomplish through the health alert?
- Are there other communications activities that could be complementary (i.e. press release)?
- What messages do you want to communicate through a health alert, and to what 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 professionals (clinicians, laboratorians, pharmacists, etc.) can best impact the success of the response?
- Should public health partners be aware of the response before they hear about it in the news media?

### Developing Health Alert 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 comprised 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 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, as well as the actions that state and local public health officials are taking to determine why HIV transmission is occurring and if it is

continuing, 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:** The audience 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 providers and others can take, ensuring those actions are based on appropriate state and Federal public health guidelines and recommendations. These can include:
  - Providing specific guidelines regarding HIV and STD testing, treatment, and prevention for those at risk for HIV and those already living with the virus.
  - Providing guidance on referrals for co-infection testing and treatment and mental health and substance use disorder treatment, when appropriate.
  - Asking that providers remain aware of increases in disease transmission or diagnosis or unusual patterns in risk behavior.
  - Providing clear protocols on reporting HIV and STI cases to state and/or Federal agencies.

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. Assure the audience that they will be kept informed of any change in the response and progress made.