

# Creating a Winning Team: Coaching Project Builds Connections for Improved STD Program Management

## STD Prevention SUCCESS STORIES



### The Evaluation and Program Improvement Scholars Project (EPIS)

*is an immersive mentoring experience created to raise the bar on sexually transmitted disease (STD) program success by training participants in best practices for capacity building. EPIS is a partnership between CDC's [Division of STD Prevention \(DSTDP\)](#), the National Network of Public Health Institutes, and the Rocky Mountain Public Health Training Center. At the heart of the project is the development of productive mentoring partnerships for Strengthening STD Prevention and Control for Health Departments (STD PCHD) recipients. Throughout the course of a cohort (a training session that lasts several months) individual mentors (coaches) with proven track records of success are paired with mentees (scholars) who demonstrate talent, vision, and the desire to take the STD programs they manage to the next level in capacity building. All participants—prospective coaches and scholars—submit applications focused on program evaluation and improvement.*

With STD rates on the rise, the timing has never been better to invest in training the next generation of public health leaders in proven STD prevention approaches. DSTDP's Evaluation and Program Improvement Scholars Project (EPIS), an initiative that focuses on investing in skills development for rising public health program leaders, might be just what the doctor ordered to help get STD program management to the next level.

"In this challenging era of STD prevention and treatment, as we seek to turn the tide on increasing case numbers of [syphilis](#), [gonorrhea](#), and [chlamydia](#), it's imperative that we help prepare leaders who can show flexibility and novel thinking when it comes to building program capacity—this is what will help us stop the current STD rate spike in its tracks," said Christina Chung, a Health Scientist in CDC's Division of STD Prevention (DSTDP).

### Calling all (exceptional) coaches

**Robert Hines, Jr., Deputy Director for Planning and Performance with the Louisiana Department of Health's Bureau of Planning and Performance**, who has coached three scholar cohorts in the EPIS project, said he has always had a natural affinity for teaching. A former [disease intervention specialist \(DIS\)](#) by training, Hines leans on his DIS field experience to help scholars develop decision-making skills that can carry them through a variety of scenarios. "As a DIS, I was faced with unexpected situations on a daily basis, never knowing what kind of reception I would get in neighborhoods where I did contact tracing and provided linkage to healthcare services. I was constantly thinking on my feet. **“Over the years and throughout the course of my career, those hard-won lessons have been incredibly useful for me, and I enjoy helping others learn how to apply informed strategy to their own STD program work.”**

**67%**

of EPIS Cohort 1 survey respondents reported learning new evaluation approaches

**386.5**

coaching hours logged in EPIS Cohort 1

**30**

STD PCHD program areas represented to date in EPIS project



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
National Center for HIV/AIDS,  
Viral Hepatitis, STD, and  
TB Prevention

“This project has shown me how an innovative approach to supporting programs can really make a difference for the scholars, and for the coaches too,” said **Mondi Mason, a Research Education and Development Administrator with the City and County of Denver’s Department of Public Health and Environment**, a three-time cohort coach as well. “As a coach, I’ve learned so much myself along the way—the program has helped me hone my own communication and leadership skills. It’s such a great opportunity for participants to learn a lot about what’s happening in other parts of the country. And making those networking connections extends well beyond the timeframe of the cohorts. **“I like to let participants know that I haven’t forgotten about them once the cohort ends, so I follow up and check in on them – I’m always willing to be a source of encouragement.”**”

“The right coaches make all the difference. STD program managers who have transcended competence and are themselves seeing real change in their own programs—those who can inspire participants to aim for excellence are a great fit for the EPIS project. Good coaches can adapt their training and guidance to benefit scholars at whatever skill level they’re working at and help them build from there,” said Chung.

## Making the connection

The goal and ultimate advantage of participating in the EPIS project is the priceless space in the day for discussion and problem solving related to program evaluation and planning that scholars gain through their interaction with the coaches. Most survey respondents who participated in the first cohort (88%) agreed that the EPIS experience helped lead to increased confidence in carrying out program improvement activities. **Theo Hudson, an EPIS scholar and the STD Program Administrator for Public Health with the Health and Social Service Division of the Delaware Department of Public Health**, said the interaction with her coach gave her access to a great sounding board for her decision-making process. **“Anyone starting a new position in STD program management should have the kind of support a coach can provide. It made all the difference for me.”** My coach was a great resource for helping me map out planning strategies, especially understanding how and why to delegate. She helped me realize I can’t do everything on my own. Having her checking on me, encouraging me, and providing guidance in making career projection plans and creating sound program improvement strategies has been invaluable.”

## Creating change for improved community health

The EPIS project continues to evolve. To date, three completed cohorts have turned out reinvigorated coaches and newly-focused scholars who have successfully grown their leadership and communication skills—skills that ultimately lead to better collaboration with peers in their own programs, stronger connections to peers in other health departments, and enhanced community-focused programs that meet people where they are. All confirming that direct investment in the people who put STD policies into practice can produce tangible payoffs:

- more effective community outreach,
- better execution of prevention strategies and treatments,
- connection and support to foster more job satisfaction,
- and in the long run, (hopefully) lower STD incidence.

“We’re excited about the potential for long-term success in different STD PCHD programs around the country because we know these new skills that encourage more sound, independent decision-making are something the scholars can take with them and use throughout the course of their careers to create positive change in the communities they serve,” said Chung.

## EPIS scholars said the coaching experience directly supports the work they do:

**“ Our coach was extremely helpful in making us think about aspects we had not considered and connecting us with other states that had done similar assessments.”**

**“ The coaching helped us to work through an evolving project definition as the process was taking shape, allowing for real time discussion and problem solving as the project evolved.”**

**“ Just learning about things that I didn’t know I didn’t know was helpful.”**

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- [National Network of Public Health Institutes](#)
- [Rocky Mountain Public Health Training Center](#)
- [STD Program Management & Evaluation Tools](#)