USING DATA, ASSESSING NEEDS:
A Guide for Community Members of HIV Prevention Community Planning Groups

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Part 1. Introduction: Why and How to Use This Guide

I. Need for the Guide

The HIV Prevention Community Planning process is designed to generate a comprehensive HIV prevention community plan. The process of developing such a plan requires the design and implementation of a community needs assessment, and the use of the results — along with an assessment of the potential impact of various prevention strategies and interventions in addressing these needs — to prioritize prevention activities for an area. The community planning groups — one or more per state — share responsibility with state and local health departments, the grantees of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), assuring that the planning process includes extensive community involvement.

The community planning groups face a special challenge — the need to be diverse and inclusive and yet share common skills and understandings necessary for their tasks. It is extremely important that planning groups be broadly representative of various target populations for HIV prevention efforts — people who reflect “the characteristics of the current and projected epidemic in that jurisdiction.”* This means including a wide range of members, among them providers of HIV prevention activities and various types of health professionals and researchers from governmental and nongovernmental organizations, as well as individuals and organizational representatives from various “communities and groups at risk for HIV infection or already infected.” These diverse community planning groups are expected to carry out a variety of activities which require both in-depth understanding of their communities and the ability to help obtain, understand, and use both statistical and other information as the basis for prioritizing needs and recommending appropriate HIV prevention strategies to meet these needs. Assuring that all planning group members have access to the information and training needed to carry out their roles represents an important responsibility of state and local health departments.

To obtain broad, accurate community perspectives requires recruiting, selecting, and maintaining active participation by a diverse planning group membership. Other initiatives, including a companion guide to this one, prepared by the National Council of La Raza AIDS Center, Center for Health Promotion**, have focused on the critical importance of an inclusive planning process and how to achieve it. Similarly, other planning efforts have discovered that retention of community members — those planning group members not required to participate because of their jobs in governmental agencies nor committed to involvement because they are HIV prevention program providers — depends to a considerable extent upon whether they receive briefing materials and training needed to be knowledgeable, full partners in the planning process.

This manual was prepared to help state and local health departments help to “level the playing field” for community planning group members. It provides information designed to assure that all planning group members share an understanding of the needs assessment process and a familiarity with terms, formats, and concepts of particular importance in understanding statistical reports and evaluations.

The guide’s primary target audience is community representatives who are members of the planning group, individuals who have extensive knowledge of a specific population but may have limited experience in needs assessment or in using statistics. These may be racial/ethnic minorities, persons from defined

* Unless otherwise identified, quotations come from the Supplemental Guidance on HIV Prevention Community Planning for Noncompeting Continuation of Cooperative Agreements for HIV Prevention Projects, issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 1993.

populations who may engage in behavior which places them at risk for HIV infection, and/or persons with HIV/AIDS or members of their families. Some individuals from these target groups, including those from community-based organizations, have extensive knowledge about needs assessment and use of statistics. This manual was designed for the others — those who do not feel entirely comfortable with these data-related aspects of the planning process.
II. Using the Guide

A. Assumptions

This guide makes two very important assumptions about the planning process and its participants:

1. **All planning group members bring knowledge and experience critical to a successful planning process.** Members who need this guide are in no sense less valuable, informed, or capable than those who already possess skills and experience in needs assessments and using statistics; they bring different kinds of knowledge and experience, which will be enhanced by gaining data-related experience.

2. **State and local health departments and all planning group members share a commitment to full participation by all members in the HIV Prevention Community Planning process.**

The content and format of the guide reflect these additional assumptions about the context in which it will be used:

1. **The users of this guide will have a basic background in HIV/AIDS, including a knowledge of issues and terminology related to modes of transmission, risk categories and populations, HIV prevention strategies and interventions, key federal legislation, and public funding agencies supporting prevention activities.** Community planning group members without such a background should receive that training before using this manual, which does cover some health and health planning terms, but does not attempt to provide a glossary of HIV/AIDS terminology or curriculum on HIV prevention.

2. **Users will have received an orientation to their roles as community planning group members, and will have received appropriate background materials such as the Supplemental Guidance on HIV Prevention Community Planning, issued by the CDC in 1993.**

3. **The guide will be used as part of an interactive, experiential process, not merely given to members without explanation or training.**

B. Using the Guide

You are now reading Part 1, the Introduction to the guide. The rest of the guide is organized as follows:

- **Part 2. Understanding Statistics: What Every Planning Group Member Needs to Know,** provides the basic information you will need to participate fully as a planning group member. It includes the following subsections and kinds of information:

  - **Section I. Community Members and the Planning Process: Importance of Full Participation,** which provides some background on the HIV Prevention Community Planning Process. It emphasizes the critical roles and perspectives of community members of the planning group, and describes the responsibilities of state and local health departments, other planning group members, and community members themselves in assuring full participation by all planning group members. Shaded boxes provide information from the Supplemental Guidance which help define and structure the work of the community planning groups.
• **Section II. Becoming Comfortable with Statistics**, which explains the importance of statistics in the HIV Prevention Community Planning process. It also describes the widespread lack of "comfort" with using numbers and mathematical concepts in the United States, and offers a common sense approach to overcoming what some writers call *innumeracy* or *math anxiety*.

• **Section III. Key Statistical Terms and Concepts**, which presents and explains some basic research and statistical concepts and frequently used terms, and suggests ways to read and understand statistics and some key questions to ask in reviewing statistical information.

• **Section IV. Using Epidemiologic Reports: A Self-Learning Guide**, which provides an introduction to the types of data and reports which are most frequently used to understand the AIDS epidemic and how it affects different populations and communities. It presents basic concepts related to epidemiology, provides examples of typical charts and tables used in HIV/AIDS monitoring reports, and provides a series of self-tests so that you can practice using these charts and tables and be sure you understand the data they present. It also discusses various kinds of data that can help your planning group in its needs assessment and priority-setting efforts.

• **Section V. Needs Assessment: The Foundation for Priority Setting**, which explains typical needs assessment processes and components, identifies important roles for community representatives in the planning and implementation of needs assessments, and suggests how you can help ensure that the needs assessment generates the information required for informed priority setting.

🔥 **Part 3. Additional Concepts: Building on the Basics** is an optional section of the guide. It presents additional information on statistical terms, concepts, and issues which — while not essential for every planning group member — will help you to become a more informed and active user of statistics and statistical reports. It addresses topics such as sampling, use of percents, averages, and statistical significance in more detail than Part 2, Section III.

🔥 **Part 4. Conclusion** provides a brief sum-up to the guide, emphasizing ways to use and share your skills in using statistics and needs assessments, and their applicability for other situations.

🔥 **Part 5. References and Resources** supplements the information provided in the guide. It includes:

• **Section I. Glossary of Terms**, which provides brief definitions and descriptions of commonly used terms related to statistics and epidemiology.

• **Section II. References and Resources**, which offers a small number of supplemental references and resources for obtaining additional information about the topics covered in the guide.

Throughout the guide, boxes provide information from the *Supplemental Guidance*, definitions and examples of concepts, sample tables and charts from HIV/AIDS epidemiologic reports, and other material designed to clarify and illustrate the topics covered in the narrative.
The entire manual attempts to provide accurate information without going into highly complex distinctions and technical discussions that are not essential to understanding the basic concepts. Our intent is to make research and statistics as they relate to HIV prevention planning comprehensible to intelligent people who must understand important issues. Most planning groups will have access to experts who can address the details and intricacies or specific approaches: this manual — when coupled with appropriate training — prepares community representatives to read and review research data and reports knowledgeably and ask these specialists appropriate questions.

If you need to find information on a specific concept or topic, try using the table below and on the following page, which indicates where to find information in the guide.

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<td>Look for shaded boxes throughout the guide</td>
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<td>Roles and importance of community members</td>
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<td>Part 2, Section I provides an overview; Section V focuses on planning, implementing, and using needs assessments</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Part 2, Section I</td>
<td>Lists types of orientation and training needed by all planning group members, as well as topics of special importance to community members</td>
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