

Key Considerations for Engaging With News Media During a Cluster Response

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

In some cases, the news media may ask questions before you have approached them or completed evaluating a cluster's reach and whether additional response is needed. In addition, the news media may be helpful in informing communities about HIV risk, and you may want to proactively engage with them to share important public health messages. Therefore, preparing for interactions with the news media can be a valuable component to your communication and response plans.

When using news media to communicate information about an HIV response, strategies may be developed that can help prevent misinformation, as well as reach at-risk groups, while minimizing sensational coverage that could stigmatize communities and populations.

When deciding if and how to engage with news media about a response, explore questions such as:

- What agency is in the lead for making decisions about communicating with news media during a response, and who from that agency should serve as the primary media spokesperson?
- What do you want to accomplish through news media coverage?
- Are there other communications activities that could be complementary to — or more useful than — engaging with news media? — e.g., social media, letters, health alerts, etc.
- What are the pros to media coverage? Are there any cons to media coverage?
- What are the pros and cons of proactively engaging with media versus being prepared to respond only if media call?
- What messages do you want to communicate through news media coverage, and to what audiences?
- Which media outlets can best reach priority audiences?
- What questions can be anticipated, and what are the answers to those questions?
- What activities would deliver the messages most effectively — e.g., press release, press briefing.
- How can alarmist or sensational media coverage and misinformation be prevented?
- How can media messages avoid stigmatizing communities and populations?
- Should anyone be aware of the response before they hear about it in the news media (local agencies, community groups, etc.)?
- How will updates be provided to media during the response?
- Who from the health department should be the media contact?

Developing News Media Messages

Though every response is different, some general considerations may be helpful when messages are being developed for news media activities. 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.”

Consider using words and phrases that can be easily understood by your audience, such as:

- “HIV data” instead of “surveillance data”
- “Increase in HIV diagnoses” or “group of related infections” instead of “cluster of HIV infections” or “outbreak” or “growing transmission cluster” or “molecular cluster”
- “Laboratory analyses” instead of “molecular analyses”

- “Monitoring” instead of “surveillance”
 - “Efforts to determine why transmission is occurring” instead of “investigation”
 - “People at risk for HIV” instead of “risk network”
- **Scale.** Clearly define the geographic area(s) of concern, as well as the affected population(s) from the very start of any communication with news media.
 - **Epidemiologic data.** Generally speaking, media will want the most recent local and national data, details of the current situation, and what can be said about why increased transmission is occurring. Specifically, media will want to know:
 - Recent HIV diagnosis trends, including numbers of diagnoses over recent years.
 - Affected population(s).
 - Any increases or changes in recent risk factors for HIV infection.
 - The affected area(s) or region(s) (e.g. statewide, county, city, etc.)
 - What is believed to be causing an increase in diagnoses (if diagnoses have increased).

If local data/findings are preliminary and subject to change, those caveats should be communicated to the media.

- **Public health action.** 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, 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.
- **Participating parties.** Reporters may not understand how public health activities to examine HIV transmission are performed on-the-ground. Therefore, it may be beneficial to say in media messages what entity (state or local) is leading the effort. If CDC is supporting the effort, weigh whether explaining CDC’s role proactively in media messages and materials would be helpful to accomplishing media objectives, or if doing so could lead to alarmist media coverage of the situation.

Other Considerations

- **Partner engagement:** You may wish to reach out to other civil and governmental partners involved in the cluster (if any) to ensure all are communicating the same basic information and reaching target audiences. Entities may include hospitals and other health care agencies, public safety, or academia (e.g., an academic lab that may be locally engaged in assessing specimens).
- **Appropriate media outlets:** From early on, consider appropriate news outlets to reach priority audiences. For example, if a cluster has been detected among Hispanic/Latino men who have sex with men, local and regional Latinx media outlets and gay media outlets may be prioritized as important vehicles to disseminate prevention messages through media coverage.
- **Spokespeople:** Consider early education opportunities for media spokespeople to make them aware of cluster detection and response activities. Also consider media training for spokespeople who have not served in this type of role previously.

Sample Press Releases

- Two editable sample press releases are available on the CDC HIV Cluster and Outbreak Detection and Response site at www.cdc.gov/hiv/programresources/guidance/cluster-outbreak. The first describes an increase in HIV diagnoses among people who inject drugs and a group of related infections. The second describes a group of related infections among men who have sex with men. Both utilize approaches outlined in this document. It could be appropriate to use some example language in your media messages and press release, or to customize example language to your specific situation and media objectives.

For More Information

Call 1-800-CDC-INFO (232-4636)
Visit www.cdc.gov/hiv