



## **Solidarity Workshop: UNDERSTANDING OPPRESSION ACROSS COMMUNITIES**

**This workshop will allow you to:**

- Identify and analyze the barriers to solidarity among folks in the AIDS community/movement/sector, with a focus on differences and issues that create tensions and divisiveness;
- Examine how power and privilege operate in the AIDS community/movement/sector based on HIV status, race, gender, sexual orientation, class, nationality, age, and religion;
- Understand the importance and strengths of diversity in the AIDS community/movement and to become a better ally to marginalized communities; and
- See Prevention Justice as a way to work across differences and rise up out of competition with one another in order to build a stronger, more effective movement to end AIDS and link up and build alliances with other social justice movements.

### **1. Introduction and Rationale**

HIV can infect anyone. We sometimes call it an “equal opportunity virus” and rightly point out that as long as the epidemic is raging unchecked, the whole society is at risk. ***Yet we also know that AIDS does NOT equally affect all parts of society.***

When we say **disproportionate** (“dis-pro-portion-it”), we mean that something is out of proportion. Proportion has to do with the balance in size or strength between different parts.

For example, if 50% of our community is female, and 50% of homeowners are female, we would say that the balance of home-ownership is “in proportion.” But if 80% of homeowners are female, we could say that a “disproportionate” percentage of homeowners are female.

The AIDS epidemic thrives on injustice, inequality, and oppression. The epidemic disproportionately affects those whom are marginalized and relatively powerless, including communities of color (most disproportionately African Americans), women, young people, transgender people, gay men and lesbians, and drug users. For example, African Americans are *disproportionately* affected by HIV, because they make up 12% of the total number of people in our country, but 50% of AIDS cases.

***Oppressed and stigmatized communities are not only marginalized from the centers of power in society, but we are typically isolated from each other.***

We are often distrustful toward each other, because of lack of experience working together for common goals and because of the psychological and social consequences of oppression – things like racism, sexism, and homophobia.

We also often feel like we have to compete and sometimes fight with each other for a share of resources that is proportionate to our community’s need. It is not uncommon for resentments to build when another community that got there first or has more power seems to get an unfair share of the resources.

Outside the HIV/AIDS community, other disease or social-problem advocacy groups often feel envious or even resentful toward those of us in AIDS for what they see as special privileges and resources to begin with compared to what they get.

*All these tensions and contradictions get worse when the resources are scarce to begin with and then stay flat or shrink over time, like they are now in the fifth year of deeply conservative governmental rule.*

Of course, the powers-that-be \*love it\* when we fight with each other, and remain distrustful. “Divide and conquer” is a time-honored strategy of small minorities to maintain power over a much larger majority.

As long as we keep fighting among ourselves, they keep shrinking our share of the society’s total resources and give more and more of it to wars overseas, and tax breaks and subsidies for the rich here at home.

**When we build bridges across our divisions on the road to unity in action, we become stronger. We build real power that we can use to win real gains.**

These divisions are deeply rooted. Most of us have little practice in bridging and overcoming them, in turning our diversity of experience into strengths as a coalition and network. **So it takes a lot of work.** This workshop is a start. It will be a time we can start to frame the issue and the tasks ahead of us each back home, and commit ourselves to taking concrete steps upon our return as we build the PJM.

## WORKSHOP ACTIVITY # 1

**Common Ground: 10-20 minutes**

This activity serves as an “ice-breaker” as well as an introduction to the issues to be addressed during the workshop. It provides participants with the opportunity to see the differences and commonalities in the room. Ask participants to stand in a large circle without chairs. The facilitators proceed to read a series of statements that require participants to step inside the circle if the statement applies to them. Facilitators can make up their own statements, depending on the group they are working with. Some examples include:

**Please join me on common ground if...**

- You are gay/lesbian/bisexual
- You are transgender
- You are HIV+
- You are an AIDS service provider
- You are a person of color
- You are from the West Coast
- You did not receive quality sex education in school
- You have had a friend(s) or family member(s) die of AIDS
- You are an activist

After facilitators get it started, participants can begin to call out their own statements. Wrap it up by acknowledging both the diversity and lack thereof in the room. Who is here, who is not, and why we are all here together.

## 2. How Oppression Plays Out in the AIDS Community

AIDS is intimately linked to many different forms of oppression – racism, sexism, heterosexism, economic inequality, and xenophobia (fear of foreigners), to name a few.

In order to *really* end the epidemic, we have no choice but to struggle against all forms of inequality and exploitation – indeed, it is this system of oppression that creates the context for AIDS to continue to be an epidemic today.

### WORKSHOP ACTIVITY #2

#### Four Corners: 40-60 minutes

This exercise allows participants the opportunity to explore the roles everyone plays as individuals in the system of oppression, and how these roles play out in the AIDS community. Hang four signs in four different corners of the room, each with the following statements:

1. A time when you have been *targeted by oppression* in the context of AIDS work
2. A time when you have been *a force of oppression* in the context of AIDS work
3. A time when you *witnessed an act of oppression* and did not do anything about it in the context of AIDS work
4. A time when you *resisted or challenged oppression* in the context of AIDS work

Divide the participants into four groups and assign each group to a different corner of the room.

Give the groups 8-10 minutes in each corner to discuss personal experiences they have had related to what is on the sign. Debrief the exercise in the large group after rotations are complete.

### 3. “Wedges” in the Community

The differences and distrust in the HIV community can be thought of as “wedges.”

Wedges split and divide us. They are used consciously or unconsciously by our opponents to keep us focused on fighting and competing with each other, rather than uniting to demand more resources to meet needs and work to end AIDS.

Some wedges are clear and easy to name and describe. Others are more complicated, especially when more than one type of social oppression is at work. Someone, for instance, may crave unity with his black or Latino/a sisters and brothers, yet feel hampered in that desire by a feeling that his/her love of people of the same gender is not accepted within that community.

**In addition, we face additional wedges in the AIDS community due to the difference in levels of funding between different cities, different states, and different regions of the country.**

Some states pay more than others for AIDS prevention, treatment, care and/or research. Some states do not contribute at all. This creates uneven levels of care depending on where you live. Also, cities and states are forced to compete with each other for federal dollars.

This exercise will focus our attention on identifying the wedges that are most important in our own communities and then brainstorming ways to start overcoming them.

#### **WORKSHOP ACTIVITY #3**

##### **Wedges Brainstorm: 20 minutes**

Ask participants to brainstorm the various “wedges” in the community – the differences and issues that create tensions and divisiveness (i.e., funding, racism, religion, political ideology, etc.). Write the response on a large paper visible to the group. After there is an extensive list, pick a few of the key issues, and ask participants to explain what each issue or problem is. Ask participants to give SPECIFIC EXAMPLES of how they have seen this play out in their communities and workplaces.

Then move to a discussion of the political/structural context of these “wedges.”

Discussion questions:

- WHY do these barriers/problems exist?
- WHO created them?
- WHO do they benefit?

#### 4. Building Bridges Across Differences

Bridges over water or canyons knit together communities that were previously isolated and empower members of those communities to move more freely across all of a city or region.

**Similarly, building bridges within our HIV community and movement can help knit us together, open up many new connections and possibilities, and allow more movement and creativity.**

It can help us build power for each of our constituent parts and for our community as a whole. In fact, it is *\*essential\** that we do this work if we are going to build enough power to successfully confront the forces of right-wing reaction and move to end AIDS.

#### WORKSHOP ACTIVITY #4

##### Moving Towards Action: 40 minutes

Pose some of these questions to the group:

- Difference makes our movement strong, but how are we going to address them and work together honestly and effectively?
- How are we going to take up each other's fights as our own?
- Given the real power dynamics within the AIDS community (i.e., we're not all affected the same way based on race, class, gender, immigration status, etc.), where is our common ground?

After a few minutes of discussion, which should build on the previous discussions, ask participants to take a few minutes to write a letter to themselves about how they can go back to their own communities and work to build bridges across affected communities when organizing for the PJM.

Whose voices are not represented, or are marginalized, in the AIDS advocacy or service work you are doing? What concrete steps can you take to create a more diverse and thus stronger movement to end AIDS?

Participants will put the letter in a self-addressed envelope and seal it, and facilitators will mail it to them in 6-8 weeks (or something).

A good way to close this training is to do a **go-around** where each participant states one concrete thing she or he can do to build bridges in their AIDS activist work in their local community.