



Strengthening Health Literacy for Gay, Bisexual and other Men Who Have Sex with Men: Case Studies of Health Department Websites

Key Takeaways:

- As part of a comprehensive HIV response, health departments must provide accurate health information conducive to the needs of different populations.
- Several health departments have found innovative ways to showcase relevant, holistic health information for gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (GBM.)
- Community engagement, planned staff time to develop and update the website, and an ability to refer to other reputable organization websites are necessary for the development and execution of public websites with relevant health information to GBM health.

Background:

NASTAD's Gay Men's Health Equity Work Group (GMHE) is dedicated to the development and dissemination of resources to strengthen the HIV and viral hepatitis response and ensure holistic care and support for GBM. As part of this effort, NASTAD developed this brief to showcase the value of promoting health education and resource dissemination on health department websites for GBM.

The websites range from sharing information specific to HIV to providing holistic care needs to not just GBM, but to the broader lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities (LGBT). The brief includes an overview of health departments' work, background on website development, and information on what resources were needed for implementation.

Literature Review:

Effective HIV responses require sound communication strategies that promote evidence-based approaches to prevention and care. This includes active health literacy among the general population and those with increased risk of certain diseases or health issues. As defined by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#), health literacy is the degree to which an individual can obtain, communicate, process, and understand necessary health information and services to make appropriate health decisions. According to the [Pew Research Center](#), in 2013, 59% of adult Americans had looked online for healthcare information in the past year. This internet use for healthcare information is [accurate as well](#) for GBM who may need to seek health information online due to limited venues available to them in their geographic area. In the current era of wide-ranging social media and online platforms, people receive information from diverse sources, though some are not based on evidence or factual data. [One study](#) noted how LGBT youth search online to find sexual health information and have concerns about what information might be available. [Another study](#) showed that websites might not keep up-to-date on the latest health trends, thus requiring continuous monitoring and technical support. With multiple potential sources of misinformation, health departments should provide relevant and timely health information to the public to prevent disease and ensure all have access to reputable healthcare information.

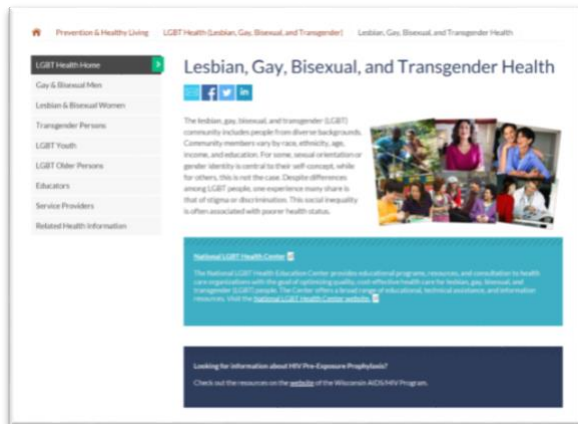
For interventions to be most effective, it is imperative to provide information and resources that are pertinent to a population's specific needs. As such, especially with the responses to HIV and viral hepatitis, particular information needs to be shared with priority populations. With male-to-male sexual transmission [accounting for 67% of all new HIV infections](#) within the United States, and gay and bisexual men at greater risks of [contracting Hepatitis A and B](#), health departments must provide information specific to the needs of GBM to prevent transmission.

More information on health literacy, communications, and resources specific to the needs of GBM can be found in the below links:

- [CDC National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy](#)
- [CDC National HIV Prevention Network](#)
- [CDC Gay and Bisexual Men's Health Website](#)
- [Building Healthy Online Communities Coalition](#)
- [Greater Than AIDS](#)

Health Department Case Studies:

Wisconsin



Website Link: <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/lgbthealth/msm.htm>

Website Active Since: 2015

Background: The Wisconsin Department of Health Services had been working on programming to address health disparities impacting the LGBT community for some time before the development of the website. The Department of Health Services identified several social determinants that contributed to those disparities. Such social determinants included stigma along with a lack of access to health information relevant to LGBTQ individuals. The website was one of multiple activities the Department of Health Services implemented to address those disparities, with stigma reduction and improved access to health information being the main goals of the website.

The website serves as a portal to access multiple LGBT health-related resources, including information for: Gay and Bisexual Men, Lesbian and Bisexual Women, Transgender Persons, LGBT Youth, LGBT Older Persons, and Educators and Providers serving LGBT students and clients, and includes information on HIV, sexual health, viral hepatitis and other holistic health needs. The intended outcome is to provide information and resources to help the LGBT community and those who serve them to access culturally responsive health information specific to their needs. According to the Department, existing resources were sufficient to fund the development of the website. Multiple staff spent time researching and developing, and will continue to update the materials with new information, once available.

Rhode Island



Website Link: <http://health.ri.gov/sex/for/gaymen/>

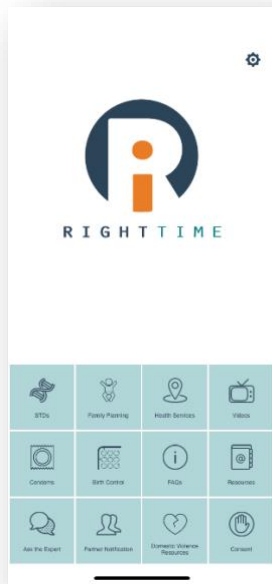
Website Active Since: 2015

Background: The Rhode Island Department of Health "Sexual Health Information for Gay Men" webpage initially focused on providing information about syphilis and local prevention, testing, and treatment resources for gay men. The health department expanded the website to include a wider variety of gay men's health content drawn from CDC and other national resources.

A desire from community and provider stakeholders for a central information space specific to the needs of GBM led to the development of the website. For example, when conducting HIV, STI, and viral hepatitis testing advertising campaigns, the Department of Health also wanted to be able to provide educational resources. Having a central location on the Department of Health website allowed for an easy way of linking clients to reputable information alongside where to get tested.

The Department of Health worked to get the website approved internally by the Division and Rhode Island Department of Health communications teams. Staff from the department update the local resources on an ongoing basis and continue to draw information from CDC and other partners. The Department of Health evaluated traffic to the website frequently. For example, after advertising the webpage in 2018 as part of the "#ProtectYourselfRI" campaign with targeted social media and gay hook up apps' advertisements, the Department of Health saw a 427% increase in the number of website visits, from 632 visits in 2017 to 3329 in 2018.

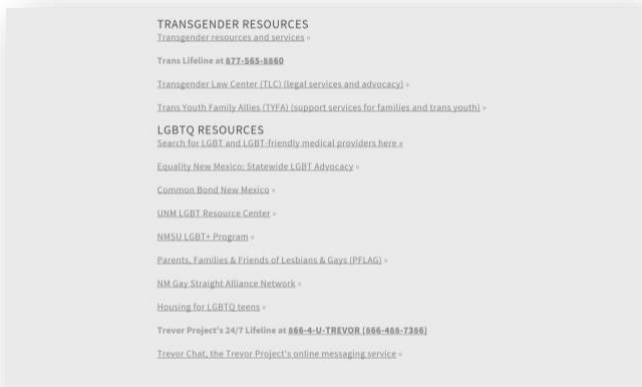
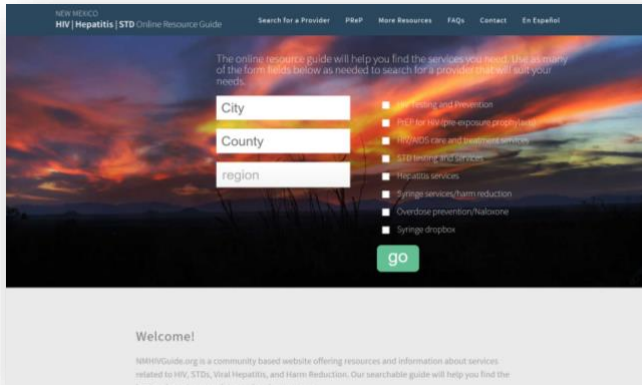
Rhode Island App – RightTime: Rhode Island’s Sexual Health App:
<https://righttimeapp.com/>



The Rhode Island Department of Health developed an app in 2018 to discretely disseminate clinically vetted STD information. The app, “RightTime: Rhode Island’s Sexual Health App” offers an innovative, high-impact means of communicating reliable health information to empower priority populations to take charge of their sexual health by increasing access to health information, prevention resources, and services. The app also aims to facilitate anonymous communication between sex partners exposed to STDs to improve notification outcomes and supplement existing partner notification services. The Department of Health included information on a wide range of sexual topics including, HIV/STI, general sexual health, family planning, and pregnancy information. This technology was adapted from Maricopa County, Arizona Department of Public Health’s “CheckAfter” app.

The Department of Health tested the app with a wide range of participants and found that users had a keen interest in being able to access sexual health information from a trusted source like the health department. Since launching in October 2018, the “RightTime” app has been downloaded approximately 3,500 times. Due to the ability of the app to detect the primary language set to the user’s phone, content is automatically translated, thus making it possible to share information in multiple languages. As of September 2019, the app has been used in 25 languages and downloaded in 52 countries – indicating the strong level of interest nationally and internationally in accessing clinically vetted sexual health information and empowering people worldwide to take charge of their sexual health.

New Mexico



Website Link: <https://nmhivguide.org/>

Website Active Since: 2009

Background: The New Mexico Department of Health (NMDOH) needed a single space where all information about HIV, STD, hepatitis, and harm reduction testing, treatment, and services could be located by community members. The health department also sought a strategy to easily update information to reduce the amount of outdated paper-based lists that existed throughout the jurisdiction.

Initially, NMDOH created a website that shared information on HIV, viral hepatitis, and other STDs and geographically searchable listings of places where community members could get testing and other services across New Mexico. There have been several upgrades and updates to the site over the past decade. The most recent have added information on PrEP, non-occupational post-exposure prophylaxis (nPEP) and syphilis. Services related to infectious disease have always been shared via a page entitled “More

Sources,” including a variety of links specific to the LGBTQ community. The website is available in Spanish and has also been optimized to be accessed via mobile devices.

NMDOH sought input from the statewide HIV community planning group before finalizing the website. At the same time, NMDOH sponsored the creation of a website for the New Mexico HIV Community Planning and Action Group (CPAG), which is a companion to the NMDOH resource guide.

NMDOH updates the website graphic design every few years and continuously keeps the data updated, ensuring the page is easy to use by community members. The website has been advertised on gay social networking apps like Grindr. Production required initial resources, and personnel time is dedicated to the design and maintenance of the website. NMDOH uses google analytics to track website usage and compare year-to-year data. The department also uses google analytics to evaluate website usage after specific campaigns or events to gather who have been directed to its information.

Georgia



Website Link: <https://dph.georgia.gov/lgbtq-health>

Website Active Since: 2011 years, and newly refreshed in 2018

Background: The Georgia Department of Public Health developed the website to ensure the public and district health departments had a state-based resource to address needs or barriers to HIV prevention and care. It included multiple resources, including the 2018-2021 Georgia Statewide MSM Strategic Plan. The website also aimed to inform the state's funded and supported agencies of ongoing initiatives.

The Georgia Department of Public Health Communications Department reviews and decides whether the information is appropriate for the website. New information is added to the website monthly.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Health department staff engaged in the development and implementation of GBM health websites recommend the following:

- **Community Engagement:** Health departments found value in sharing drafts of the website pages to HIV Planning Groups and members of the community to measure usability, interest in the community, and more. When developing websites, health departments should ensure community members review and prepare drafts.
- **Continuous Updates:** Health departments should ensure someone is responsible for the general monitoring and updates of website information. As new information becomes available (e.g., information on PrEP), health departments should update websites as soon as possible to ensure accurate information is available to the community.
- **Link to Additional Resources:** When it is not possible for health departments to provide specific information, consider linking to existing reputable online resources, such as the resources listed above.

NASTAD is committed to supporting equitable HIV and viral hepatitis responses. As such, work must be done to support the needs of gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men. This work includes ensuring that public government sites provide the evidence-based information needed to prevent the spread of HIV and viral hepatitis and seek treatment and care when needed.

For more information, contact NASTAD Manager, Health Equity [Andrew Zapfel](#).