

# HIV COUNSELOR PERSPECTIVES *Supplement*

## Partner Services Update

Every HIV test counseling session offers opportunities for HIV prevention and improved health. Counselors talk with HIV-negative clients about ways that clients want to reduce their chances of being exposed to HIV, and with clients who test preliminary positive, or confirmed positive, about linkages to care and referrals to maintain their health. In addition, the HIV Partner Services Program can help clients who are living with HIV to inform sexual and needle-sharing partners who may have been exposed to HIV. This allows these partners to make a more informed decision about whether to test for HIV themselves—and, if HIV-positive, to receive care and treatment. Since every new case of HIV involves both an HIV-negative and an HIV-positive person, Partner Services are a critical way of interrupting the spread of HIV.

### Three Ways to Help

Partner Services (PS) are offered through local health departments and are always free of charge, voluntary, and confidential for both the client who is living with HIV and for his or her partners.<sup>1</sup> There are three ways that Partner Services can help people let their partners know that they may have been exposed to HIV:

- **Self-notification** is the process by which the HIV-positive individual discloses his or her HIV-positive status to past partners. Partner Services provides coaching to clients about whether or not to undertake self-notification and how to disclose if a client chooses this approach. The coaching process may also include role-playing.

- **Dual-notification** is the process by which a client discloses his or her HIV status to a past partner in the presence of a counselor trained in Partner Services. During dual notification, the counselor does not disclose the client's

status. Instead, he or she seeks to support the client and partner once disclosure has occurred, and to offer the partner counseling, testing, and other appropriate referrals.

- **Third-party notification** involves a counselor or other provider asking for (or “eliciting”) the names and contact information of the client’s sexual and needle-sharing partners. The counselor then forwards this information to a Partner Services provider who contacts the partners, notifies them that they may have been exposed to HIV, and then offers them HIV counseling and testing. The name of the original (or “index”) client is never revealed to the partners who are being contacted. The confidentiality of the original client’s partners is similarly protected. Partner Services staff never discloses any information to the original HIV-positive client on the outcome of partner notification. This includes whether or not the partner was notified, tested, the results of the test or any referrals made.<sup>2</sup>

### Confidential and Voluntary

In all three forms of notification, counselors conduct thorough screenings for domestic violence and other psychosocial concerns that could threaten the index client’s safety during disclosure. It is important to note that Partner Services programs do not force disclosure—PS is always voluntary and non-coercive. Instead, counselors help clients consider the benefits and risks of notification, as well as the various methods of notification.

### A “Venue Based” Approach

Test counselors should be the first professional staff to broach the subject of Partner Services. But it is important to note that disclosure assistance is also available to clients long after the test counseling session. Many

newly diagnosed people are not ready to access Partner Services, or to disclose the names of their sexual or needle sharing partners. Many also continue to engage in behaviors that could transmit HIV—which could expose other partners to HIV.

The California State Office of AIDS, therefore, emphasizes a “venue-based” model for Partner Services. In this model, HIV-positive clients may access PS in a variety of HIV-related venues at any time—including not only counseling and testing sites, but also behavioral prevention programs, public health clinics, and private medical offices. The model is client-centered because clients can take advantage of the disclosure assistance that works for them when they are ready to do so.

### Assistance is Available

The California State Office of AIDS collaborates with the state Department of Public Health’s STD Control Branch to provide Partner Services technical assistance and support to each funded Local Health Jurisdiction (LHJ) based on that health department’s capacity and need. Some LHJs provide a variety of PS activities including elicitation of partners and partner notification. Other local health jurisdictions collaborate with the STD Control Branch to provide support. To find out more about how Partner Services are offered in your area, click on this link to the Partner Services County Contacts: <http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/aids/Documents/PSContactList.pdf>.

The California STD/HIV Prevention Training Center in Oakland, Calif. offers several different courses for providers on how to implement Partner Services. They range from a three-day overview to a one-day course on coaching clients on self-disclosure. While these courses will be beneficial to anyone wishing to learn more about PS, they are national training programs and, therefore, are not California specific. Check the Prevention Training Center’s website for upcoming classes: <http://www.stdhivtraining.org/>

For more informal training and education, you can contact the Partner Services Coordinator or HIV/AIDS Director of your local health department.

### Conclusion

HIV test counselors are in an excellent position to explain the process of Partner Services, the importance of this intervention in public health, and to ease any client fears surrounding confidentiality. In order to be most effective in using this intervention, however, counselors must be aware of the proper procedures for referring clients who are interested in Partner Services. Since the procedures for each LHJ vary greatly, please learn the protocol that your local health department uses.

Partner Services is an effective, important public health intervention. It reaches out to people who may be living with HIV and helps link them to care and treatment, as well as to prevention programs and other support services that help reduce their risk of transmitting HIV to others. ■

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Volume 2 / Number 2, February 2012

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*PERSPECTIVES Supplement* is funded in part through a grant from the California Department of Health Services, Office of AIDS. It is a publication of the AIDS Health Project, affiliated with the University of California, San Francisco.

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