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NIDA GRANT TO TEST A NEW INTERVENTION TO REDUCE DRUG USE AND HIV-RELATED RISK AMONG PARTNERED GAY MEN

Dr. Tyrel Starks, an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, and faculty investigator of the Hunter College Center for HIV/AIDS Educational Studies and Training (CHEST), has been awarded a five-year grant from the National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA), totaling \$4,701,017, to test an individually-delivered intervention intended to reduce drug use and HIV incidence among HIV negative men in relationships with other men.

Gay and bisexual men continue to account for a significant majority of all new HIV infections in the U.S. and many – possibly most – of these new infections are transmitted between main (not casual) partners. Studies of partnered gay men suggest that the agreements and understandings couples develop about permissible risk behaviors are associated with drug use and HIV-related sexual risk taking. This finding has highlighted the importance of communication between relationship partners about risk behaviors. The relevance of communication extends to new biomedical prevention strategies for HIV. Gay men who are highly motivated to go on pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) are also more likely to try and persuade their partners to use PrEP.

Effective communication between relationship partners can be a source of resilience. Dr. Tyrel Starks has led a research team at CHEST in the initial development of the PARTNER intervention (Prevention and Resilience with a New Emphasis on Relationships). This brief, 4-session intervention integrates video-based communication skill building and motivational interviewing to help partnered gay men clarify their substance use and sexual health goals and then engage their partners in discussions about how to achieve them. This study will fund a randomized control trial of this new intervention.

Doctoral students from the Health Psychology and Clinical Science PhD program at CUNY will be trained to deliver the intervention, and the project will involve many students and interns from Hunter College. The research team will also develop and validate a novel procedure to assess PrEP adherence through fingernail samples.

CHEST's mission is to conduct research to identify and promote strategies that prevent the spread of HIV and improve the lives of people living with HIV. We have been advocating for and working with the LGBT community since 1996. www.chestnyc.org

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