

Building Trust and Promoting Sexual Health for Young Men

Matthew Rivas-Koehl and Samuel Beckwith

There are over 20 million new sexually transmitted infection (STI) cases reported in the United States each year, and [almost half](#) of these cases occur among young adults ages 15 to 24. Young men are much [less likely](#) to be tested (and therefore, treated) for STIs than young women, despite the fact that some STIs, such as syphilis, are more common among men. Additionally, many common STIs—such as chlamydia and trichomoniasis—are [asymptomatic](#). Thus, there may be a lengthy delay between an STI infection, diagnosis, and treatment. This delay can increase the harm young men experience from an infection and increase the likelihood of unknowingly spreading an infection to their partner(s). Over time, delayed STI diagnosis among young men can increase the burden on health departments and other clinical providers.

Increasing STI testing and treatment among young men is a public health priority: It can improve their health, their partners' health, and, ultimately, lessen the burden on public health departments. Research on [community engagement](#) in STI prevention has found that, by reducing stigma and increasing trust, young men will face fewer barriers to obtaining the services they may need. To remove barriers, providers and health departments need to address [some of the factors](#) that get in the way of sexual health care among young men, such as misinformation, feeling unwelcome, or concerns over confidentiality. This resource contains seven practical strategies sexual health providers and health departments can consider to better engage young men in STI-related services, thus making care more accessible. If implemented, any of these low-cost shifts in practice have the potential to improve the sexual health outcomes of young men *and* those who they have sex with—strengthening community well-being overall.



Ensure that local public health and clinical providers are knowledgeable about the STI-related needs of men

Some clinical staff may be less familiar with delivering male-centered STI care. It is important to provide needed supports and professional development opportunities to ensure providers are well-equipped to meet the needs of young men related to STI prevention. For example, health departments can provide periodic trainings to ensure staff within any organization recognize and can speak to the importance of men's


overall sexual health, including STI prevention and treatment services. Health departments could develop in-house trainings with an experienced and knowledgeable staff member, or invite experts from other local providers, universities, or advocacy organizations that specialize in male sexual and reproductive health. Providers could also identify outside trainings, conferences, or certifications that the organization could support through professional development funding (if available) and share those opportunities with staff. If possible, invite clinical staff from other organizations in the area to participate. This can help grow the community’s capacity to provide quality sexual health care to young men and help ensure that an organization does not become overburdened as the only “male-friendly” option.



Establish a youth advisory board

The specific needs of young men vary across, and even within, communities. To ensure that health departments are best meeting the needs of the young men in their communities, consider engaging them directly by establishing a youth advisory board. [These types of programs](#) have been successful in getting youth to provide insight into how to best engage their peers in STI prevention efforts. It is important that youth who participate in an advisory board feel ownership over their position, so be sure to make their voices heard by implementing their suggestions and taking their feedback seriously.

To attract youth to an advisory council position and ensure they feel valued, it is important to compensate youth for their time, expertise, and participation. For example, in [Oregon](#), the public health department has established a statewide youth health council and pays members \$45 per hour for their time. In [West Virginia](#), an organization that promotes sexual and reproductive health for youth pays Youth Advisory Council members \$20 an hour. Other ways to promote young men's investment include offering letters of recommendation for jobs, college applications, and scholarships; featuring youth in public-facing media that demonstrates their leadership in the community; asking them to review materials before they are released to the public; and consulting them on language for social media posts about upcoming health department events.



Center young men in messaging about testing and preventing STIs

It is important to message that *anyone* who is sexually active should protect their health with STI-related services. Many existing resources and guides related to STI testing and prevention—including TV commercials, posters, social media ads, and

flyers—focus on specific populations, such as women or gay or bisexual men. As a result, they may inadvertently imply that STI testing and prevention services are not for all young men. To overcome this, ensure that some messaging materials include illustrations or photographs of young men to remind them that STI services are for them. Media campaigns and existing toolkits, such as [Get Yourself Tested](#) are helpful ways to spread the word about how and where young men can access STI testing.



Partner with community organizations that serve young men

Outreach to young men is crucial. The ability to provide the full spectrum of STI services to young men—including counseling, testing, treatment, and follow-up—will have the biggest impact when health departments are able to get young men in the door for care. Partnering with organizations that are already engaging young men, especially populations or in communities where STIs are more prevalent, is one way to effectively reach and build trust with this population, without the need to develop new infrastructure. Partners can also help minimize the stigma associated with STIs.

Examples of potential partner organizations include:

- Amateur sports clubs or local minor league/semi-professional teams
- Men's groups (e.g., within recreation centers or places of worship)
- Boys & Girls Clubs and other organizations offering out-of-school-time programming
- Youth shelters, juvenile justice programs, and other youth centers
- Local high schools, including school-sponsored student organizations and school-based health centers
- Community colleges

Encourage community partners to:

- Share [statistics and facts](#) about prevention, testing, and treatment with their young male clientele.
- If possible, share statistics or takeaways from STI-related data health departments and providers have collected with partners, and encourage them to do the same.
- Provide coaching and support so that partners present information in an accessible and empowering way; remind partners to ground their messaging around STIs in data, and to be aware of the stigma and anxiety many young

men feel when seeking STI-related care. Share tip sheets and resources like this one to discuss additional ideas with partners.

- If possible, engage male facilitators or partner organization representatives to serve as relatable messengers about the importance of STI prevention for young men.



Take STI testing to young men

To promote STI-related services among young men, consider ways to make STI care mobile and reach young men in places they hang out or visit. For example, consider hosting a pop-up or mobile site at a community event such as a high school football game, minor league ballpark, 5K run, local street fair, or during the orientation week of a local college or university. In these spaces, it can be helpful to brand the testing location like a vendor stall instead of making it feel clinical; use music, team colors, and giveaways to attract attention. Wear T-shirts instead of scrubs. Members of the youth advisory board could be in attendance to encourage participation from their peers.

Other organizations have had success with this approach. For example, [The University of Miami](#) partners with a community lab for monthly walk-up STI screening outside the rec center. In rural Southern Illinois, [Southern Seven Health Department's Wellness on Wheels](#) van parks at various locations across the counties they serve, offering chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, and HIV tests alongside other preventive health screenings. In Texas, [Austin Community College](#) partners with a local clinic to offer an HIV Mobile Unit that sets up at a different one of its campuses each month.



Correct false information about men and STIs

As with other medical topics, young people are likely to encounter and spread myths and misinformation about STIs. One national [study](#) of youth found that about one in five believed most of their peers did not know that STIs can be transmitted through oral sex. Facts about STIs may also become misinterpreted in ways that could affect young men. For example, some may misinterpret the fact that some STIs can be more *consequential* for women (e.g., such as infertility if left untreated) as a sign that STIs are not a major health concern for young men. Beliefs like these can lead young men to overlook other important elements of STI prevention and care—for instance, failing

to recognize that, even if a man's health consequences from an STI are minimal, they could be severe for their partners once transmitted.

There are a variety of ways health departments and providers could correct false information regarding STIs in young men. Examples include:

- Developing brochures related to STIs and young men and offering them to all male visitors
- Encouraging providers to discuss common misconceptions about STIs during visits
- Creating short, attention-grabbing materials that provide one important fact about STIs for young men (e.g., to post on social media, display in clinics, etc.)



Provide resources that address information young men should know about

Young men often do not know what to expect when it comes to STI testing, and may not know what questions to ask either. Help demystify the STI testing experience by providing young men with information. For example, Linn County Public Health department created a [video](#) that explains the process. Creating resources and signage to address common concerns may also encourage uptakes in testing rates. For example, health departments could use signage that says, “*Urine test—no needles, clothes stay on!*” or offer QR codes that link to a short video so that young men know exactly what to expect.

For any resources that are created, consult young men on the youth advisory board to ensure that the language, tone, and visuals are appealing and will resonate with young men. Co-creating documents with the advisory board—such as a “Frequently Asked Questions” document or a “Myth and Fact” resource—may be a helpful strategy too.

Resources

STIs

- [Centers for Disease Control Information about STIs](#) – Webpage with links to fact sheets and comprehensive information about STIs.
- [Centers for Disease Control STI Treatment Guidelines \(2021\)](#) – Webpage with current treatment guidelines for STIs issued by the CDC.
- [Preventive Sexual Health Services](#) – Webpage with comprehensive information about sexual health care needs for men.

Engaging Young Men

- [Conversation Starters: Engaging Males in Family Planning Services](#) – Tip sheet on how to talk to young men to engage them in services.
- [Risk Assessment, Education & Counseling for Men in Reproductive Health](#) – eLearning course on best practices for working with young men in sexual and reproductive health care spaces.
- [Youth Advisory Board Toolkit](#) – Toolkit developed by the Indiana Department of Health to help organizations create and maintain a Youth Advisory Board.
- [Engaging Young Men Tip Sheet](#) – Tip sheet on engaging young men in sexual health education programming.

Suggested citation: Rivas-Koehl, M. & Beckwith, S. (2025). *Building trust and promoting sexual health among young men*. *Child Trends*. DOI: 10.56417/5371a8597o