Promoting Health Service Linkages Among Underserved African American Women at High Risk for HIV

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Street-based female sex workers constitute an especially vulnerable population for HIV, as they are often enmeshed in chronic patterns of substance use, sexual risk, homelessness, and violent victimization.

These factors, combined with low socioeconomic resources and social isolation, present significant barriers to HIV risk reduction and services utilization among marginalized women.

In a high HIV prevalence and incidence area like South Florida, intervention initiatives are needed to support behavior change and linkages to HIV services.
The Women Protecting Women project was designed to test the relative effectiveness of two intervention approaches for:

- Increasing linkages and engagement with health and social services; and,
- Reducing risk behaviors for HIV
The intervention trial tested 2 strengths-based case management approaches for reducing barriers to health care, and facilitating services utilization among the target population.

Strengths-based case management emphasizes client abilities and assets, and allows the client to control the direction of service acquisition.

Women were randomly assigned to: A professional only condition; or, A professional/peer team.
The 5 CM contacts were structured to:

› encourage the client’s readiness for treatment or other service linkage;
› build the relationship with the case manager/peer;
› elicit strategies for change based on identified client strengths; and,
› identify barriers to service linkage and develop ways to address them.
Informed Consent, Drug Screen, Locator Information, Baseline Interview and Random Assignment

- Professional Only SBCM Intervention
  - Sessions 2-5
    - Active Referral
      - 3 & 6 Month Follow-ups

- Professional/Peer SBCM Intervention
  - Sessions 2-5
    - Active Referral, Ongoing Peer Contact
      - 3 & 6 Month Follow-ups
Eligibility and Recruitment

- Eligible clients:
  - Were between 18-50 years of age;
  - Were African American women;
  - Engaged in illegal drug use 3 times/week;
  - Engaged in sex trading 3 times/month.

- 562 women were enrolled into the study between 2007-2010.
Demographic Characteristics
( N=562 )

- Mean Age 39.3 Years
- 52.0% Less than High School Education
- 54.8% Homeless in Past 90 days
- 17.4% HIV Positive (self-report)
Drug Use Characteristics: Percent Using in Past 3 Months

- Alcohol: 88.4%
- Marijuana: 68.3%
- Crack: 70.8%
- Other Cocaine: 60.0%
- Heroin: 8.2%
- Rx Sedatives: 25.8%
- Rx Opioids: 19.9%
Sex Work
(N = 562)

- Mean of 14.6 years in sex work
- Mean of 19.1 male partners (past 3 months)
- 48.7% report unprotected vaginal sex (past 3 months)
88.0% of the sample reported lifetime sexual, physical, or emotional abuse.
49.5% reported abuse before age 18.
34.0% of the sample reported sexual or physical victimization by a “date” or client in the past 3 months.
Case Management Interventions

- In spite of the numerous challenges faced by this group of women, the Strengths Based CM interventions demonstrated high levels of acceptability: more than 90% of the clients attended 4 of the 5 offered sessions.

- Study retention rates were high: 88% and 83% completed 3 and 6 month follow-ups, respectively.
Case Management Interventions

- Overall, significant declines were observed in HIV risk measures, including substance use and dependence, and numbers of sexual partners.

- In terms of service acquisition, 38% were linked to substance abuse services, including formal treatment (22.2%) and self-help groups (15.5%).
Days Crack in Past 90

- **Professional Only** (p<0.001)
- **Professional and Peer** (p<0.001)

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Baseline</th>
<th>Three Month</th>
<th>Six Month</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>49.9</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional and Peer</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>13.9</td>
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</table>
Times Unprotected Vaginal Sex

- Professional Only (ns)
- Professional and Peer (ns)

Baseline: 17.3
Three Month: 9.8
Six Month: 12.8
Male Partners

- Professional Only (p<0.001)
- Professional and Peer (p<0.001)
HIV Test

Baseline | Three Month | Six Month
---|---|---
Professional Only: 0.39, 0.66, 0.54 (p<0.001, p<0.01)
Professional and Peer: 0.33, 0.61, 0.53 (p<0.001)
A line graph showing HIV Care professional and peer comparison over three time points: Baseline, Three Month, and Six Month. The blue line represents professional care only, with no significant difference (ns). The red line represents professional care and peer, also showing no significant difference (ns). The graph shows a slight increase in care at three months, with a decrease at six months for both categories.
The data on intervention completion suggest that the SBCM protocols are highly acceptable to this population of drug-involved, marginalized women.

Intervention group differences appear to be minimal, though both conditions had significant effects on HIV risk behaviors and service utilization.

With supportive intervention services, marginalized women can be successful in changing high risk behaviors and engaging with drug abuse and HIV services.
Client Feedback on the Interventions: Comments from Women

- It feels real! The Case Manager makes me feel like I am somebody, that I do matter!
- It helped me to break my goals down. I did not know where to get started, now I have a plan.
- The ladies been out there too, so they know where I'm coming from, they know how I feel.
- They really listen to me and they don't look down on me.
- I came here broke down, beat up, and worn out. Coming here, I opened up. It was just a lot of emotional support being around people that knew me, knew where I came from, knew where I was trying to go.