TuSalud

# Addressing Inequities Faced by Gay Latino Men

June is LGBT Pride month, and as the number of parades grows, so does the number of Latinos coming out, celebrating their lives and talking openly about the obstacles they face.

June 9, 2011 By Cristina Gonzalez

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“This June, recognizing the joys and sorrows that the gay and lesbian movement has witnessed…we observe [the first] Gay and Lesbian Pride Month.” These were the words spoken by President Bill Clinton on June 2, 2000. Ten years later, President Barack Obama declared June to be Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Pride Month—under today’s more-inclusive acronym LGBT—and he called “upon all Americans to observe this month by fighting prejudice and discrimination in their own lives and everywhere it exists.”

As communities everywhere work to welcome their LGBT members, one growing community has been pushed into the spotlight: Latino gay men (LGMs). These men are facing a difficult future—in 2006, Latino men who have sex with men (MSM) represented 72 percent of new HIV infections among all Latino men and nearly 19 percent among all MSM in the United States. To get a real picture of the HIV epidemic among LGMs, the National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors (NASTAD) released a report titled A Traves de Nuestros Ojos.

“This report reaffirms our commitment to providing a comprehensive approach to addressing health and social inequities faced by Latino gay men,” said Francisco Ruiz, senior manager at NASTAD. “It reminds all of us that to address this epidemic we need to further our conversation, and more importantly our action—health inequities are rooted in social injustices that make some population groups, like Latino gay men, more vulnerable to poor health than other groups.”

Here, the NASTAD findings.

**Collaboration**

Health departments and community-based organizations are the troops on the front line of the HIV epidemic. They provide health services, social services and support for LGMs across the United States. The White House launched the first National HIV/AIDS Strategy (NHAS) last year, but as Obama acknowledged, its success depends on extraordinary levels of “coordination, collaboration and accountability.”

Unfortunately, collaboration has turned into competition. Fighting for space, time and limited resources has forced health departments and community-based organizations into adversarial relationships instead of partnerships. As a result, people who rely on those program—such as Latinos—are left to suffer.

**Capacity**

The NHAS also calls for those working in HIV prevention to "promote public leadership of people living with HIV." However, that hasn't been the case on the ground.

"Many health departments recognized a lack of Latino representation…with a particularly sparse presence of Latino gay men," Ruiz said. "Officials also voiced challenges in recruitment and retention of Latinos, and Latino service providers often voiced a lack of knowledge of these organizations and desired more information on how to become involved."

In other words, LGMs simply don't know about Latino organizations, and when they do seek out organizations for help, they're not seeing themselves reflected in positions of power. And those Latinos in power are stretched thin.

**Culture**

LGMs surveyed said cultural beliefs and practices were incredibly positive and stabilizing factors, providing structure and support through difficult times. However, participants admitted that some aspects of traditional Latino culture—such as machismo, homophobia, rigid gender roles and the central role of religion—lowered their self-esteem, kept them closeted and held them back from seeking health care services, participating in programs and assuming leadership positions.

"LGMs experienced aspects of cultural ideologies and religion as a source of homophobia, moral judgment and an institutional actor that, at times, seeks to limit the acceptance of Latino gay men in the Latino community and society," Ruiz said.

So, while "la cultura" was a source of pride, it also limited the acceptance of LGMs in the Latino community.

**Challenges and Constraints**

From a lack of economic opportunities and culturally appropriate (and Spanish) health resources, to legal issues of immigration laws and gay rights, LGMs rattled off a list of obstacles that prevented them from moving forward. In particular, immigration seemed a giant hurdle to leap. Many LGMs cited their own fear of local anti-immigrant views as a barrier to seeking treatment, and providers themselves expressed confusion over what could and couldn't be done based on a client's immigration status. And when LGMs did get into care or access services, they faced a total lack of bilingual and bicultural materials and professionals.

Nonetheless, while hearing the firsthand experiences of LGMs can be discouraging, Ruiz has hope for a brighter future.

“We hope this report does not simply get stored on bookshelves, websites or hard drives,” Ruiz said. “We hope the findings provide an impetus for forward movement toward policies and programs that promote health and social equity for all populations, particularly Latino gay men,”

To read the NASTAD report, click here.

To read the NASTAD report in Spanish, click here.

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