Reinventing SISTA for Young, Transgender Women of Color: DIVAS and TITA

The Transitions Project provides capacity building assistance (CBA) around the implementation and reinvention of SISTA for transgender women of color. SISTA’s intended target population is young, African American, heterosexual women. This group-level intervention emphasizes ethnic and gender pride so as to strengthen self-efficacy with respect to safer sex practices. Transitions would like to highlight two community-based organizations (CBOs), the Life Foundation in Honolulu and Bienestar in southern California, that have successfully reinvented SISTA interventions for young, male-to-female (MTF), transgender women color.

Bamby Salcedo, the HIV Prevention Program Manager at Bienestar has successfully adapted and implemented SISTA for Latina transgender women, now known as DIVAS (Destacadas Intervenciones Variadas Acerca del SIDA). Bienestar has ten centers in three different counties, San Diego, San Bernadino and Los Angeles. Bamby estimates that about 75% of the transgender women in Los Angeles County are Latina. As part of her Transgeneros Unidas program for Latina MTFs, Salcedo ran seven full cycles of SISTA last year and is currently running two cycles of the five-session intervention.

To run the intervention, Bamby has two facilitators who conduct the program entirely in Spanish. Bamby translated materials, and instead of reading poems to reflect the oral traditions of African cultures, they sing Spanish songs; she took suggestions and selected songs based on focus groups. She went to St. Louis for the SISTA training last year with a coworker and they participated and took away what they could from the experience (the SISTA training, of course, focuses on the original priority population, young, African American, heterosexual women).

According to Bamby, the DIVAS meeting spaces are already adorned with Latin cultural symbols and that their sessions also include traditional Latin food. The Bienestar space is already full of Latin-themed cultural symbols. Most of Bienestar’s transgender clients are doing survival sex work, may inject silicone and/or hormones, experience incarceration,

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and homelessness; some are better situated and perhaps do sex work but not for survival. *Bienestar* provides incentives, but based on participant feedback, the women say they really look forward to coming back. Retention is very successful.

In Hawaii, the *Life Foundation*’s Harley Davidson has implemented a thriving adaptation of SISTA, called TITA. Founded in 1983, the *Life Foundation* is an AIDS Service Organization located in Honolulu, Hawaii, including other satellite offices in the outer Hawaiian islands as well. *Life* was the first HIV/AIDS organization in the state; their HIV prevention outreach is not limited to the state of Hawaii but extends to the outer boundaries of the South Pacific Islands: American Samoa, Micronesia, and Guam, to name a few.

The *Transitions Project* visited the *Life Foundation* in the fall of 2006, and we were most impressed with their recently renovated facility. We met with the Executive Director, Paul Groesbeck, the Director of HIV Prevention Services, Peter Tuiolosega Silva, the HIV Specialist Charles Monoiki Ah Nee, and Ashley “Harley” Davidson and her colleagues Cathy Kapua and Sina Sison. This dynamic staff welcomed the *Transitions Project* with the tangible spirit of Aloha.

As for the TITA adaptation, Harley Davidson and her colleagues spent nine long months adapting, tweaking, fine-tuning and tailoring SISTA for implementation with Hawaiian transgender women. TITA stands for T-girls Informing T-girls about Topics on AIDS; ‘*tita*’ is also the native Hawaiian language word for ‘sister.’

TITA consists of several adaptations that make the intervention more culturally appropriate for Hawaiian transgender women. After piloting the intervention, Ms. Davidson found that converting the five weekly two hour sessions into one weekend retreat improved retention. As for the content of the intervention, Ms. Davidson adapted the cultural and gender pride component of SISTA for Hawaiian and Asian Pacific Islander cultures. TITA explores the cultural legacy of transgender women, or *mahuwahine*, in the pre-colonial contact history of Hawaiian and other Polynesian peoples. In pre-contact Hawaii, gender non-conforming people were perceived as extraordinary and held exalted positions as healers in the minds of their peoples. One very adept addition to TITA is the inclusion of a photo shoot at the conclusion of the five sessions. The photo shoot not only encourages group bonding and pride but also cultivates a sense of community and family, or *ohana*, as it is called in Hawaiian. Ms. Davidson has found that the added photo shoot piece has enhanced participant retention and contributed to the waiting list of eager TITA participants.

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The *Transitions Project* is proud to highlight both Bienestar and the Life Foundation as model programs of HIV prevention for young transgender women. Please contact Hale Thompson at hale.thompson@ucsf.edu if you are interested in learning more about these, or other, SISTA adaptations for transgender women. We can assist you in assessing your transgender population’s needs and adapt, pilot and implement SISTA accordingly.

**Community Advisory Council Spotlight:**
**Dana DeAndra Turner, Esq.**
Dana DeAndra Turner, Esq. is the *Transitions Project* first Community Advisory Council member (CAC) to have accepted our invitation to join our council. One of the main reasons that Dana was unanimously invited to join our team is that she has been advocating for transgender rights and social justice for over thirty years. Currently living in Manhattan, Dana has crusaded for the betterment of transgender people, especially transgender women of color, through her work at *Conscious Contact* as well as the *Sylvia Rivera Law Project*.

Dana has been living with HIV since 1987. She was diagnosed during her second year of law school at Georgetown University Law Center in Washington, D.C. which led to her dropping out of law school, then returning, and ultimately graduating with the Juris Doctorate in 1991. With her law degree, Dana’s professional focus has been in the areas of public interest law and relentless campaigning for the rights of people living with HIV/AIDS.

Dana’s reputation precedes her in social justice communities for her searing wit, her infectious enthusiasm, her elegant sense of style, her lets-get-it-done philosophy as well as her cut-to-the-chase way of speaking up for the important issues pertaining to underserved populations. Her insights and support have been invaluable to the work of the *Transitions* team. Many thanks to Dana!

**Tips for Providers**
Increased employment and training opportunities are essential to HIV prevention for young transgender persons of color. Encourage your organization to improve its transgender cultural competency by hiring more transgender staff. Of course, one or two transgender staff does not mean that the organization’s entire staff no longer needs regular cultural competency trainings around serving transgender populations, but having transgender staff does raise the level of legitimacy and trust that your transgender population will attribute to your organization. Similarly, increased employment opportunities for young transgender persons quickly translates into empowerment as well as a reduction in survival sex work and the other risk behaviors that often come with sex work.

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Announcing the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention New Grantees under Program Announcement PS06-618

In autumn 2006, the CDC announced the awardees under program announcement PS06-618. The Transitions Project would like to recognize and congratulate the following organizations that have been funded to adapt and implement SISTA and Mpowerment for their transgender populations. They are:

COAI, Inc.                     San Juan, PR       SISTA
Howard Brown                   Chicago, IL       SISTA
La Clinica del Pueblo          Washington, D.C.  Mpowerment
Native American Community Health Center Phoenix, AZ  Mpowerment
AIDS Healthcare Foundation/Ark of Refuge San Francisco, CA  Mpowerment

In addition the CDC awarded two grants to organizations that will implement their own “homegrown” interventions for transgender populations. They are:

Children’s Hospital Los Angeles, CA    AIM
Prevention Point Philadelphia Philadelphia, PA   TIP

In preparation for these awards, the Transitions Project has developed materials and strategies to aid in several spheres of HIV prevention intervention development. We provide transgender cultural competency trainings to staff and stakeholders, including trainings for adapting Mpowerment and SISTA, needs assessments, and consultations around adaptation, implementation and evaluation. We also strive to create a national network of culturally competent providers; to that end, we encourage you to contact us and let us know how your organization has effectively intervened on the unique influencing factors and risk behaviors that transgender persons face.

Transitions Project & Samuel Lurie Presenting at HPLS in May!

Be sure to attend our workshop at HPLS in New Orleans this May when the Transitions Project staff and Samuel Lurie will present on “Designing Effective Interventions for Transgender Persons.”

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