

Introduction

Community Health Workers (CHW) play a crucial role for sexual health, community health promotion and HIV/STI prevention among gay men and other men having sex with men (MSM). Despite the importance of CHW for the sexual and community health of MSM, their precise work, role, knowledge and skills are almost unknown on the European level.

Objective

Within the framework of the ESTICOM project (www.esticom.eu) a Training Programme for Community Health Workers (CHW) working with gay, bisexual and other MSM has been developed. It aims to increase the knowledge, skills and competencies of CHW to develop and provide a range of activities and services that support improved MSM access to HIV, STI and Viral Hepatitis prevention, testing treatment and health care services.

Methods

A draft toolbox curriculum to train CHW across Europe was developed. It was guided by the results from a literature review conducted within the ESTICOM project and integrated the preliminary results of the ECHOES survey. Both studies gained important insights in the trainings for CHW available in Europe as well as the training needs of CHW.

90% of trainings were didactic, information based sessions covering Prevention, Screening/Testing and Treatment, mostly on HIV. Training gaps around other knowledge of new technologies and issues such as ChemSex were identified.

Topics like attitudes, skills (e.g. communication, interpersonal, service coordination or capacity building) were not covered in most of the trainings. Cultural competencies were seldom addressed. Based on the study and survey results, recommendations for the development of the ESTICOM Training Programme were compiled and included in the development of the toolbox curriculum.

This draft toolbox curriculum was piloted from January until October 2018 in trainings involving 24 European states and participants from 29 European countries (see poster P02/08). The objective was to evaluate the draft training material across different European countries, cultural backgrounds and legal and structural environments to gain feedback for the finalisation of the training material in August 2019.

Results

The draft training material developed cover a wide range of topics that CHW need to provide their services.

The training materials were developed under four modules, each with their own aim.

Aim 1: To increase the access to prevention, including testing services for HIV, STIs and Viral Hepatitis among MSM and priority sub-groups.

Aim 2: To improve linkage and retention to care, as well as quality of care, including treatment for HIV/AIDS, STIs and Viral Hepatitis.

Aim 3: To improve the integration of services to ensure patient centered care, including in-patient and out-patient facilities, including Community & Prison Health Services.

Aim 4: To reduce stigma and discrimination due to sexual orientation and of people living with HIV/AIDS in healthcare settings, including prison health services and in the community.

The trainings work with the background, experience, skills and attitudes of the participating CHW. Data-based topics are often already covered by national training approaches and will be mainly addressed in the ESTICOM e-learning modules that will be developed at the final stage of the project. The face-to-face trainings will focus on a mix of input and interactive exercises that support the CHW to share their thoughts and experiences, to interact and gain a common basis for their work. This curriculum is embedded in a whole-system approach that includes existing training programmes. Its aim is to complement the training CHW need with training modules based on the identified gaps of these training programmes in addition to the well established training concepts that exist in most parts of Europe.

Conclusion

The implementation of the Pilot Training Programme proved successful in all 24 countries. Following the finalisation of the training materials in August 2019, it has the ability to help support CHW, secure improvements and build quality in the future work of CHW with MSM by filling training gaps and addressing the training needs of CHW in the different contexts in the European region. The assessment of the Pilot Training Programme shows the importance of the modular, culturally competent approach and its focus on attitudes, skills, stigma and discrimination that supports both CHW and the work aimed at MSM.

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