PrEP Focus Groups Summary

Understanding Attitudes of Detroit-area Black Women toward PrEP and Its Marketing

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Introduction

The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) engaged Public Sector Consultants (PSC) to facilitate focus groups with Detroit-area Black women to hear their thoughts on the department's upcoming Mahogany Blue campaign. The campaign is the Michigan version of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's #ShesWell campaign, focused on increasing awareness about pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) among Black women and increasing capacity among healthcare providers to prescribe PrEP to reduce the transmission of HIV.

PSC conducted two focus groups with 18 total women in January 2024. The discussions included community members as well as representatives from community-based organizations and health care providers who actively provide sexual healthcare to Black women. Participants were asked about their current understanding of, and opinions on, PrEP, as well as about their reactions to Mahogany Blue campaign materials. This summary contains insights gathered during the discussions that can inform the campaign's continued implementation, as well as identify strategies for future related campaigns.

Key Takeaways and Recommendations

- Awareness of PrEP across participants ranged from one woman learning about PrEP within the last month to others who have been actively taking PrEP or prescribing it for many years.
- Women stated they felt that PrEP was generally safe and effective
- Women also said they would feel comfortable seeking more information or prescriptions for PrEP, despite being aware of possible side effects and expressing some frustration with providers not fully understanding the benefits of prescribing PrEP to Black women
- Participants shared that the most compelling health campaign materials represent Black women in the community and have both educational and attention-grabbing elements.
- The #ShesWell campaign imagery was overall well received, but participants offered ways for MDHHS to improve upon it with the Mahogany Blue campaign by integrating more images of real women with a variety of skin tones, body types, and ages to balance the animated advertisements; tailoring the campaign to Detroit and Michigan; and incorporating ads that include audio of someone reading or talking about PrEP to reach people with different levels of literacy.
- Mahogany Blue materials should be placed in varied locations, such as social media platforms, billboards, radio advertisements, and doctor's offices to reach a wide range of women.

Awareness of PrEP

Women were first asked about their familiarity with PrEP. Across both groups, knowledge ranged from being very familiar with the medication to others who reported only learning about PrEP within the last month. In general, they were more familiar with pill options than injections. Those who worked in the sexual healthcare field, such as those who provided testing, education, or prescriptions related to HIV, were most familiar with PrEP. In each group, at least one person described PrEP with some variation of the following statement, which many participants agreed was the best summary of their understanding:

"PrEP is like birth control but for HIV."

While many people who worked in sexual healthcare learned about PrEP through their jobs, many women also cited learning about PrEP from either trusted friends and family or current or past sexual partners. Others reported learning about it from their healthcare provider, as they were taking PrEP for prevention or living with HIV and receiving Truvada (a brand-name medication) as part of their antiretroviral therapy. Fewer people cited learning about PrEP from advertisements such as those on television or billboards. While women reported seeing these ads, many did not know until recently that PrEP was available to Black women due to the nature of its marketing targeting predominantly men who have sex with men (MSM).

Attitudes Toward PrEP

Participants were also asked about their attitudes toward PrEP, regardless of their level of familiarity with the medication. While most of the women in both focus groups stated that they had generally positive attitudes toward PrEP, several still questioned its safety, side effects, and effectiveness.

Effectiveness

Across both focus groups, no one questioned whether PrEP was effective at preventing HIV if taken as prescribed. While women acknowledged not knowing specific statistics or facts, they often cited personal experience or the experience of others they trust contributing to their belief that PrEP is effective. Within each group, the service providers were able to offer additional education about the relationship between PrEP's effectiveness and medication adherence and describe some of the consequences of nonadherence.

Safety and Side Effects

While women generally felt that PrEP was both safe and effective, some did express concerns regarding PrEP's potential side effects, which were validated by others talking about their personal experience with side effects of Truvada, specifically. However, the women who were currently taking PrEP, or have taken it previously, shared that they have had fewer side effects with other brands.

Women also expressed that because they knew less about the PrEP injection, they had questions about its safety and side effects compared to the pill. One woman also highlighted that there can be heightened medical distrust among Black women when considering injections specifically. She also offered an example that considering injections can be difficult for those who prefer alternative or holistic approaches to healthcare.

Comfort

After some discussion within the groups, many of the women expressed that they would be very comfortable taking PrEP if they find a brand that works for them. However, not everyone felt comfortable with the prospect of talking to their healthcare provider about PrEP. While some participants said they felt they could openly ask questions of their provider and be respected, others said they have been made to feel uncomfortable by past and current providers when talking about PrEP or general sexual health. Women suggested that providers could benefit from training on interacting with patients, understanding how to help with payment and assistance options for PrEP, and how to create respectful healthcare environments.

Insights on PrEP Marketing

The second half of discussions was focused on marketing for PrEP and the Mahogany Blue campaign. One of the takeaways from both groups was that many women did not know PrEP was available to Black women because all the marketing they see is focused on MSM and, more recently, members of the transgender community. As a result, discussion participants said they often skip or do not pay attention to the advertisements.

Materials Should Be Representative and Memorable

Real Representation

To understand what types of health marketing resonated with Black women, the participants first talked about general health marketing campaigns they have seen. Campaigns that used spokespeople who were familiar to them, either celebrities or local community leaders, such as "Get Real About Diabetes" with Anthony Anderson were commonly cited as memorable and relatable. Many women stated that it is more interesting to see people who look like them and who can offer real testimonials.

As previously mentioned, many interviewees stated they did not feel that Black women are represented in the PrEP campaigns they have seen, making them less likely to pay attention. When shown the draft Mahogany Blue materials, participants most often liked those that showed real Black women rather than illustrations or cartoons. However, after seeing the full set of examples, many acknowledged that having a combination of real people and the more stylized, illustrated ads as part of a cohesive overarching campaign would ensure that they appeal to the wide range of different preferences that Black women can have. Because of this, there was a specific request for the addition of videos including real women talking to the camera or talking to each other to complement the existing animated videos. One person noted that doing so would be more engaging for younger people using social media. She indicated this younger audience would be likely to quickly scroll past the animated videos without first being introduced to PrEP by a real person.

These discussions also indicated broad support for adding more Detroit- and Michigan-specific imagery in the background of images to make them feel real and less staged. Another common theme was that representation should include Black women with a variety of skin tones and body types to show that PrEP is for all Black women.

Full reactions to individual Mahogany Blue campaign materials are in the appendix.

Catchy, Yet Truthful Messaging

In addition to seeing more Black women in advertisements, focus group participants widely agreed that they wanted to see realistic and informative messaging. Ideas included showing a brief conversation between two friends, or a mother and daughter, about HIV risks for Black women and the benefits of PrEP. Women said doing so would not only be attention-grabbing, but also educational. Additionally, they noted that using dialogue in ads would reach people with low literacy or disabilities that limit accessibility. Both discussion groups suggested using a combination of depictions of more serious conversations and those that are more focused on positive energy and happiness. However, a few women noted that even

those focused on positive energy and happiness should also have some substance to make it clear what PrEP is and how to learn more so they understand why it is relevant for them.

Many women spoke to the importance of a memorable beat or slogan to help them remember the message or product. However, some women cautioned that other health campaigns intended for Black communities could become patronizing depending on the music used and depictions of Black people. For example, one woman said that she often feels pandered to when she sees a health commercial that feels like it has been "made in BET style."

Campaign Materials Should Be Placed in Diverse Locations

When thinking about the places that they have seen healthcare messaging, women had diverse opinions on what was most memorable to them. While many women said that billboards and radio ads have been effective for them in the past, women between the ages of 20 and 30 said social media was far more effective. For example, one woman said that if she were in the car as a passenger, she would miss a billboard because she is already browsing social media on her phone and is likely not listening to a radio station.

Participants also talked about how word of mouth is one of the most effective ways to spread a message among Black women. As such, it is especially important to use materials that catch Black women's attention, such as through the realistic representation discussed above, in places that many people will see them and want to share the message with others. In addition to social media and billboards, women offered the following ideas:

- Increase ad presence on Spotify, Apple Music, or other music streaming services
- Partner with local content creators/influencers to promote messages
- Place materials in senior centers and public spaces, such as parks
- Work with local businesses, such as sports arenas, schools, casinos, and hotels
- Place materials in bar or restaurant bathrooms
- Work with local employers to distribute materials in plants or factories
- Collaborate with labor unions to distribute materials

Appendix: Reactions to Mahogany Blue Campaign Materials

*Video

Likes

- There is representation of different types of women and relationships, including women in a relationship with men, which is not often seen in PrEP ads
- The women don't have faces, which makes it easier to imagine oneself
- Switching scenes is visually interesting
- Mentions of mental health feel relatable

Dislikes

- Would like to see this type of imagery also with real people
- One person noted that it might be better to lead with the "Prevent HIV with PrEP slide" to make it more clear at the start what the ad is about

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*Video

Likes

- Representation of a variety of people
- The music is more approachable and doesn't sound too much like a "jingle"
- The pill coming toward the screen is visually interesting
- They like the animated style of this one

Dislikes

- While they like this ad, they thought it would be smart to do one version with real people
- This ad is interesting and catchy, but could do more to communicate what PrEP is

Likes

- This woman has darker skin
- The message is relatable because many women feel like they need to take care of themselves and they also take care of others frequently
- The message feels straightforward
- Bright imagery
- Real person rather than a cartoon or illustration

Dislikes

- Would like to see a Detroit or more "Michigan" background

Likes

- Real people that look like they're having a real conversation
- Conveys that PrEP is safe for pregnant women
- It feels realistic
- The message feels straightforward

Dislikes

- Would like to see a Detroit or more "Michigan" background

Likes

- Real person rather than a cartoon or illustration
- The message is relatable because many women feel like they take care of others before themselves
- The woman is clearly a Black woman and her race is not ambiguous
- Bright imagery

Dislikes

- Generally, this may not feel inclusive to all people if it's a standalone ad without other materials that represent darker skin tones, different body types, and different ages

Likes

- Bright colors
- Doesn't feel scary and makes HIV and PrEP seem like more approachable topics
- The butterflies are cute and joyful
- The pill bottle feels like a key point
- The presence of the computer feels representative of telehealth

Dislikes

- The cartoon/illustration style can feel childish
- Needs more emphasis on HIV by moving the second sentence of the message to be the first sentence
- Before reading the message, this feels like an advertisement for mindfulness

Likes

- It is targeted just to Black women
- They liked that there is access to more information on the back

Dislikes

- Cartoon/illustration style is not appealing and looks like "typical clip art of Black women."
- At first glance, this could be assumed to be for different types of women's health care such as cervical or breast cancer because of the colors
- It's not clear from a first glance of the front of the card that it's specific to HIV because "sexual health" could apply to different STIs