

Providing Right Message and Information

for Target Population

The Activities and Role of the Gay Community Center 'akta' in HIV Prevention within the Gay Community in Tokyo

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Abstract

HIV transmission through homosexual contact continues to rise, accounting for 60% of HIV and 40% of AIDS new reports in Japan. In particular, HIV infections have been rapidly increasing, not only in Tokyo and Osaka, but also in Nagoya, Fukuoka and Okinawa.

'akta' was established in Shinjuku 2 Chome in 2003, an area in Tokyo which has a large concentration of gay commercial venues, in order to conduct and facilitate HIV prevention activities amongst gay and bisexual men, through funding provided by the Foundation for AIDS Prevention.

While the Tokyo area has a wide range of socially and sexually diverse gay and bisexual men and groups, evaluation research indicates that 'akta' has been effective in accessing a wide range of groups and in developing and HIV prevention materials and programs. The existence of the Community Center has facilitated a number of outreach programs including 'Deli-he(a)l(th)' which provides condom outreach to gay bars and clubs, as well as the conducting of education workshops with young gay men and gay sauna staff funded by the Tokyo municipal health department.

Community center 'akta' conducts a wide range of activities and it's existence has facilitated the condom outreach activities conducted by 'Delivery Boys', attracted support from the media including gay magazines and club event organizers, as well as fostered cooperation with NGOs such as PLACE Tokyo (a CBO who provides support to people living with HIV and AIDS) in developing materials and community education projects to make visible the existence of peoples living with HIV and AIDS within the gay community.

The activities of the Community Center have been driven by a community development approach, and through the involvement of artists, designers and drag queens in developing materials and organizing events, the center has allowing a large number of gay community members to network and connect in a way that would not have been previously possible. Culturally appropriate materials and programs designed by gay staff have ensured that outputs have been of a high quality. Furthermore, the establishment of the center has been critical in creating a cultural and social focal space for gay and bisexual men to meet, get information and hold events.

Keywords: MSM, Gay-bi sexual male, HIV, AIDS, Prevention

1. Introduction

According to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) AIDS Trends Annual Report¹⁾, the number of reported cases of persons infected with HIV and AIDS patients has continued to rise since 1996, particularly among Japanese males. In 2006, homosexual transmission accounted for more than 60% of new HIV infected cases and 40% of AIDS patients. Since the late 1990s, significant increases in HIV infection rates have been seen in Osaka and Aichi in addition to Tokyo, with signs of an increase in regions such as Fukuoka and Okinawa. While HIV prevention activities have been conducted among gay communities in Japan since the 1990s, the relative levels of funding and size of gay community groups conducting such activities have been quite small. Despite this, the activities of gay community groups were instrumental in pushing the AIDS Prevention Guideline Review Committee to re-evaluate MHLW HIV policies and subsequently 'men who have sex with men' (MSM) were identified as a target group facilitating targeted funding for HIV prevention for MSM from 2003. Establishing community centers in the gay community was seen as a way to build a supportive environment for behavioral change at the community level as well as to disseminate HIV prevention activities and materials to MSM. In response

to this, funding was provided through the Japanese Foundation for AIDS Prevention to open Community Center 'akta' in Shinjuku 2-Chome, an area in Tokyo which had a concentration of commercial establishments for gay and bisexual men. For the purpose of this paper, gay community is defined as gay and bisexual men, and men who have sex with men (MSM) accessing gay commercial venues including gay bars, gay clubs, gay shops, and gay saunas.

2. The Meaning of Having "A Place"

1) Community Center 'akta's Role as a "Place" in the Gay Community

Local communities have libraries and public facilities that are open to residents. These residents can freely access these facilities to obtain information and participate and develop activities which enhance their day to day life. However, due to the stigma associated with homosexuality, general public facilities are not freely accessed by gay and bisexual males for the purpose of getting information and conducting community development activities.

The lack of a place to conduct community development activities and promote information exchange amongst gay and bisexual men has impeded efforts to conduct HIV prevention activities in Japan. Without a base where gay and bisexual men gather to meet and obtain information, there was no place from which dissemination of HIV information, materials and activities could be developed, conducted or distributed.

Community Center 'akta' was opening in 2003, in Shinjuku 2-Chome, in Shinjuku ward in Tokyo. The establishment of 'akta' has created a physical and openly visible place where individuals, groups and organizations concerned with gay community issues including health, welfare, community development, and arts can access. Thus, 'akta' has created a place where gay and bisexual men can by chance obtain gay community information, including information relating to HIV/AIDS, gay community events, health, welfare and social services targeting gay community members, and allowing the linking of various informational and social networks.

2) 'akta's Activities

Shinjuku 2-Chome has the largest conglomeration of gay businesses in Japan with roughly 300 gay bars as well as gay shops, clubs, saunas, and beats/cruising spots. The area has a long history as being a place where gay and bisexual men gather and currently several thousand gay and bisexual men visit the area on any particular day. On the weekends, club events and the like are held and attended by gay and bisexual men from all over Japan.

Apart than Shinjuku 2-Chome, in Tokyo there are also concentrations of gay commercial establishments in the Ueno/Asakusa area, in Shimbashi and in the Shibuya area. There are a number of major gay magazine publishers in the city, and through this media it is possible to reach large populations of gay and bisexual men not only in Tokyo but through the whole of Japan. Through increased Internet use, MSM without direct physical access to gay commercial areas, gay saunas and cruising areas, and gay magazines have also been increasing, and the diversity of the gay community in the Tokyo area can be said to be continually expanding.

Community Center 'akta' was established by the Japanese Foundation for AIDS Prevention as an "educational facility for implementing HIV/STI prevention among gay and bisexual men" and it has now been operating for four years. The reason for establishing 'akta' in Shinjuku 2-Chome was in order to reach gay and bisexual men accessing gay bars and businesses who are not interested in HIV/AIDS and related education and preventive activities. The most important consideration was the creation of an open and relaxing atmosphere which could also be a space where exhibitions could be held (Fig. 1). Rainbow Ring, a gay NGO which has been conducting HIV related research and prevention in the Tokyo area has managed the Center since 2002.^{2) 3)}

Since its establishment, 'akta' has become well known in the Tokyo area as well as nationally as a base for HIV prevention and community development among the gay community. According to a questionnaire survey conducted in 2005 with MSM attending club events in Tokyo, "MSM who frequently visit Shinjuku 2-Chome had a high recognition rate of 'akta', and the ratio of MSM who had actually visited 'akta' was also high"⁴⁾ (Fig. 2)

Community Center 'akta' has also become a place for gay cultural, social, health and welfare groups, government bureaucrats dealing with HIV related portfolios, and NPOs/NGOs concerned with HIV, health, drug and alcohol, mental health issues, as well as sexuality, sexual minorities, and migrant issues to network. 'akta' has developed a strong base from which HIV prevention activities can be conceptualized and implemented in collaboration with a wide range of gay-related commercial establishments. It has



Community Center 'akta'
 Dai-ni Nakae Bldg., Room No. 301
 2-5-13 Shinjuku, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo
 Hall open: 4:00pm – 10:00pm
 Closed: 2nd Sunday of every month, year-end holidays

Fig. 1 Interior of Community Center 'akta' in Tokyo

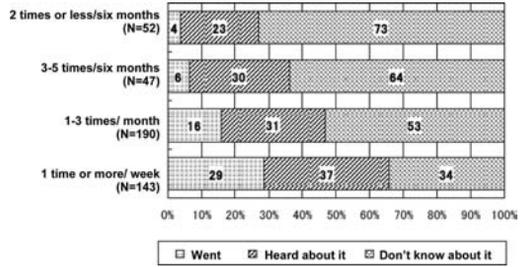


Fig. 2 Recognition Level of Community Center 'akta' Among MSM's According to Visiting Frequency to Shinjuku 2-Chome

become a place where individuals, organizations, government officials researchers and students concerned with HIV and AIDS, who previously had little experience relating to the gay community, to work with gay community members, thus facilitating the implementation and development of HIV prevention activities for MSM. (Fig. 3) One example of this is the conceptualization, development and implementation of the condom outreach project 'Deli-Hel Boys' (Delivery Health) delivering condoms and HIV prevention materials to gay bars, venues, shops and saunas.

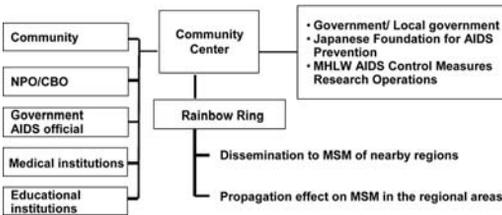


Fig. 3 Figure Describing the Types of Organizations with whom Community Center 'akta' Collaborates

3) Community Center 'akta' Activities

The activities that Community Center 'akta' is primarily involved in are as follows:

- Development of HIV related materials and programs for the gay community
- Distribution of HIV related materials and outreach to gay businesses
- Providing a space for information relevant to the gay community
- Providing a space for those involved in HIV/AIDS prevention and support to use
- Providing a place to conduct community related educational workshops and lectures, etc.
- Exhibition space (for gay community and HIV related artists etc)

Community Center 'akta' has space available for artists in the community to conduct exhibitions. Events have included art exhibitions and musical performances, and holding them at 'akta' has created opportunities to reach people not usually interested in HIV. Networks have been formed with community artists holding art events, and other culturally significant leaders in the gay community including musicians, dance party organizers, DJs and the like. The utilization of such networks has facilitated the development and distribution of educational materials and programs. In the 2005 financial year, there were over 10,000 cumulative visits to 'akta'.

Accompanying the increase in the number of visitors to 'akta', the number of requests for information from clients has also been increasing. Many of the consultations relate to HIV (including: where to go for HIV testing, concerns about how HIV infection occurs, availability of medical care and support for infected persons) as well as concerning STIs, the use of illegal drugs, homelessness, mental health issues, coming out and family issues. In response to these consultations, 'akta' staff must expertly listen to the persons concerns, and refer the person on to the relevant NGO, government service, or support group as necessary. In the case of an emergency, information materials regarding HIV testing, appropriate medical and treatment services have been collated.

A barrier to conducting HIV related activities within the gay community has been the absence of gay

community newspapers. In order to publicize gay community activities, as well as providing a forum to discuss gay community issues, 'akta' publishes a newsletter "monthly akta" and approximately 5,000 copies are distributed every month through outreach and at gay events through the 'Delivery Health Boys' (described below). The paper contains the 'akta' monthly schedule, community information, as well as information about HIV and STI testing, medical treatment and support services, and HIV related projects and activities being conducted through 'akta' and other organization.

3. Providing a Real Face for HIV Related Activities

1) Outreach Project 'Deli-hel' (Delivery Health Boys)

'Deri-Hel (an abbreviation for 'Delivery Health') is the name for the outreach project in which condoms, HIV related materials and 'akta' monthly newsletters are distributed to gay bars, club events, gay shops and saunas by volunteer staff who are called Delivery Boys. Most of the establishments in Shinjuku 2-Chome are gay bars, clubs, shops and saunas, accessed by approximately several thousand gays and bisexual men daily. Outreach activities aim to raise the visibility and awareness of AIDS, STDs and safe sex through condom distribution to gay bar customers and employees.

In July 2003, "Delivery Boys" volunteers were solicited via flyer and internet advertisements, and from September 2003 they began distributing condoms every Friday evening. In order to make educational activities visible in the community, the Delivery Boys wear fashionably cool uniform overalls while doing outreach in Shinjuku 2-Chome. Condom packages were originally made in seven designs which was later increased in number and printed on the scale of 4,000 units per design (See Fig. 4). The reason for creating many different designs is to maintain customers' ongoing interest in condoms and to foster appeal in a wide range of ages and tastes. Condom dispensers installed in bars and clubs were made in a size which would not get in the way of the business activities of the cooperating venues, and original dispensers were made of collapsible card board that could be made cheaply and simply. From the outset, the philosophy behind the project was to develop outreach activities in a way which would be sustainable over the long-term (Fig. 4).

Key to the ongoing continuation of the 'Deli-Hel' project is the volunteer staff of young gay and bisexual men (mainly in their early 20s). Many of the volunteers joined the project motivated by the "cool" or "fun" image. Since beginning the Deli Heru project, despite a turnover of staff, outreach activities have been maintained every week. Conducting outreach to the various gay bars and venues is a fun experience for the Delivery Boy Volunteers, and allows them to participate and be visible within the gay community in a constructive way which sustains the motivation of the volunteer staff. Participating in condom delivery activities serves as an opportunity for the Delivery Boy Volunteers to educate themselves. In order to be able to respond to gay bar customers and staff questions about safe sex, HIV and STIs, Delivery Boy Volunteers conduct training workshops. Every week between 7 and 10 Delivery Boy volunteers distribute condoms to 140 to 150 establishments. The activities of this 'Deli-Hel' project have been covered in a special feature of a gay magazine and have become well known not only in Tokyo but all over Japan. The 'Deli-Hel' project plays a role of forming connections with commercial establishments and has the function of promoting the HIV related activities conducted through 'akta' and other organizations.

4 Creating a Space for Collaboration and Networking

1) Art Exhibition Space

At 'akta', gay community artists are able to use the space to hold exhibitions, lectures, film showings and the like. Gay community members interested in these projects come to 'akta', and as a result a group of people not necessarily interested in HIV/AIDS are brought to the Center. Also the artists who hold exhibitions at 'akta' become interested in the activities being conducted there, and subsequently participate in helping create educational and promotional materials. 'akta' is a place that brings educational activities and gay community members together and plays a role in expanding community activities.

2) Condom Package Design Project

The production and distribution of condoms is seen as important to raise the visibility of condoms as a HIV and STI prevention tool, rather than merely a contraceptive for heterosexuals. To make the condoms appealing to MSM, to date there have been 62 types of condom package designs created. Among these designs, many have been created with the help of gay and non-gay artists and designers. This has resulted in the development of educational materials which appeal to groups with various interests (Fig. 4). The

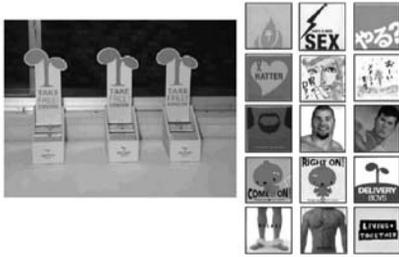


Fig. 4 Condom Outreach Materials
Condom dispensers and condom packages

condom designs are talked about in the bars and clubs, by customers and staff raising the visibility of ‘akta’ activities. The artists and designers who help create the designs are also key persons in the community and the participation of such people is a major contribution in making HIV more visible in the community.

By including the community in the creation of HIV prevention materials, in contrast to contracting material design through a commercial advertising agency, materials are created which take into account the actual needs of the gay community escalating the appeal of the materials and improving HIV awareness in the community.

3) Collaborative Projects

A number of projects have been developed with the purpose of raising the visibility of HIV positive people within the gay community. The Living Together project started from an exhibition held by NPO “PLACE Tokyo” at ‘akta’ on the theme “Living Together with HIV-positive People”. The exhibition included photos and journal excerpts written by HIV positive people, their friends and family, which was made into a booklet “Living Together” published by PLACE Tokyo. This booklet is used to conduct “Living Together Lounge” events, held once a month in Shinjuku 2 Chome (Fig. 5), in which journal excerpts are read to background music. The “Living Together Lounge” is the joint effort of large number of people including musicians, doctors, government officials, and famous people who have been asked to do readings as well as the people who attend the event and staff. Each event is attended by more than 50 people from diverse range of sexualities, backgrounds, and ages.

A related program is the “EASY! Campaign” conducted during the month of December in 2005. The idea behind “EASY!” was the promotion that HIV positive people and HIV negative people living together in the gay community is ‘easy’. This project produced a number of ‘Easy’ educational materials (including 5,105 condom sets, 2,785 photo books) which were distributed at a wide range of events accessed by gay community members through the cooperation of gay bar owners and gay event organizers. The photo books employed good design and photographs appealing to gay men in an effort to reach people indifferent to HIV.

The Living Together and Easy projects were successful, not only in bringing a number of NGOs together to collaborate, but also was able to involve many HIV-positive people, and create materials where the reality and opinions of HIV positive people could be exchanged. By actually thinking about the issues facing HIV-positive people in the gay community, the project became an opportunity to make HIV visible as something related to oneself and also bring about self awareness about HIV prevention.

5. Conclusion

In the highly diverse gay community in Tokyo, the establishment of ‘akta’ has played a significant role in developing and implementing a wide range of activities and materials aiming to raise the awareness about HIV. Employing a community development based approach, preventive education programs such as condom outreach have been carried out with the co-operation of gay bars, gay saunas, and gay shops and HIV workshops at gay club events obtained financial support from the Tokyo Metropolitan government.



Fig. 5 Living Together (LT) Project
Advertising flyer for a Living Together event and photo of someone reading at a Living Together event

Projects involving gay and bisexual men themselves, as well as HIV positive people has resulted in the development of educational materials and methods which have high appeal to those affected by HIV and have promoted collaboration with a diverse number of individuals and groups within the gay community. It is critical that 'akta' be a place easily accessible by the gay community and one that is managed by the gay community. Through collaboration with gay commercial venues, NPO PLACE Tokyo and other NGOs, materials and projects which raise the issues of HIV-positive people living in the gay community have been conducted. Community center 'akta' has created a focal point for HIV prevention, support for HIV positive people, and gay community development, and it is critical that such activities are supported and increased in order to meet the unmet and growing needs of MSM regarding HIV prevention and support.

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