

CDC's National Tobacco Control Networks Support Puerto Rico LGBT Community Events & Inclusion

Sunday, June 6, 2010 was a bright sunny day and full of excitement in Puerto Rico. People from all walks of life participated in Gay Pride festivities in the capital city, San Juan. While paying respects to the families of the several transgender women murdered in the last months across the island, local LGBT groups, activists, a few government officials, and thousands from all genders and sexual orientations showed their pride and support for the LGBT community. In between vibrant shows, words of unity and calls for action, participants were thirsty for gay memorabilia, educational resources, and opportunities to support equality for all. Similar events took place in the gay-friendly setting of Boquerón on June 13 in the town of Cabo Rojo.



For these two consecutive Sundays and with much enthusiasm, a handful of volunteers led by members of the National Latino Tobacco Control Network (NLTCN) and the National LGBT Tobacco Control Network engaged over 500 people who showed interest in our “mini-gay-library” of publications on health, tobacco issues, legal rights, community surveys, a government petition, bags, pens, pins, candies, and other goodies and educational materials. Donated by Lambda Legal (www.lambdalegal.org), a national organization committed to achieving full recognition of LGBT civil

rights, hundreds of “*I am making the case for equality*” bags were filled not only with Lambda’s materials on civil rights for HIV+ people, youth in the education system, and legal and financial planning for LGBT couples, but also with educational materials from the two Networks, the Puerto Rico Tobacco Free Coalition, the Puerto Rico Department of Health Cessation Quitline *!Déjalo ya!* (Leave It Now!), the Latino Commission on AIDS, and the Social Justice Sexuality Initiative from the City University of New York (CUNY). Members of these two National Tobacco Control Networks were able to pull together resources from all these organizations in order to educate the community. Some provided supplies; others purchased the tables and chairs, or paid for volunteer lunches, while allies from the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) provided staff and logistical support in preparation for the events. This collaboration was essential to provide Pride participants with health information and other educational opportunities, which seemed very limited during the festivities.

Through our participation in Pride events, we were able to collect an additional 292 NLTCN sponsored health-tobacco surveys among the LGBT community of Puerto Rico. This increases the total survey sample to 431 since distribution began in local LGBT events and activities in November 2009. We continue the search for additional venues to distribute the survey and increase the final sample. We are currently analyzing the sample with the support of our NLTCN Steering Committee Member, Dr. Elba Díaz-Toro, Associate Professor of the School of Dental Medicine, UPR.



In addition, a total of 420 signatures were collected for a Lambda sponsored petition asking the Puerto Rican Department of Justice and the local Police Department to create official links within their respective agencies with groups and individuals representing the LGBT community. Some local groups have claimed that in the last eight months seven murders of gay and transgender people have taken place around the Island, which motivated people to sign the petition. National and local groups will be taking the signatures directly to government officials and agencies. Networks' members have been active on rallying support, sharing information, and connecting local groups and individuals with national resources in support of comprehensive approaches to address issues of health disparities, stigma, and discrimination towards the local LGBT community. Lessons learned will be shared later among other Latin@ and LGBT groups in the mainland.

Just as important was the distribution of the Social Justice Sexuality Survey, a nationwide initiative that investigates the socio-political experiences of LGBT people of color, sponsored by the Sociology Department of the City University of New York (CUNY) in partnership with the Human Rights Campaign, the Gay and Lesbian Task Force, among other gay advocacy groups. During our participation at Pride events, National Network members collected a total of 115 completed surveys providing a richer set of data to create a profile of the LGBT community in Puerto Rico. The Initiative is interested in better understanding how identity enhances or inhibits the experiences of the LGBT population around accessing health, civic and social engagement, among other important issues. Folks can complete the survey online and read more about the Initiative at www.socialjusticesexuality.com

Furthermore, during the last Puerto Rico Tobacco Free Coalition meeting in June 2010, hosted by the Puerto Rico Department of Health (DOH-PR), National Networks' members had the opportunity to bring the LGBT perspective to the agenda. We distributed valuable educational materials from NLTCN and the LGBT Tobacco Control Network and discussed the inclusion of gender and sexual orientation questions in island-wide surveillance surveys. During the exchange of ideas, Quitline staff showed interest to incorporate these questions as part of the demographic data collected during calls, but showed concern regarding LGBT cultural competency and over saturation of demographic questions. The DOH-PR is also communicating with the CDC to include these questions in the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) for Puerto Rico in accordance to the *LGBT Surveillance and Data Collection Briefing Paper* (2008) from the LGBT Tobacco Control Network and as supported in the recently released report by the American Lung Association, *Smoking Out a Deadly Threat: Tobacco Use in the LGBT Community*. Local tobacco Coalition members are ready to be inclusive of the LGBT community and address the need for additional research specific to the LGBT community.

Estrategias Culturalmente Competentes para la Comunidad LGTB

1. Adopte y haga visible su declaración institucional no discriminatoria.
2. Incluya miembros de la comunidad LGTB dentro de sus grupos de planificación y grupos asesores de la comunidad.
3. Asegurese que sus empleados sean entrenados en competencia cultural LGTB, especialmente para quienes están en contacto con sus clientes.
4. Promueva materiales afines a la comunidad LGTB. Usar lenguaje inclusivo en su organización.

Since 2009, both Networks have been overwhelmingly supportive of surveillance opportunities, outreach, and education, including the translation, edition, and adaptation of the survey instrument and by identifying (and sponsoring) national Latin@ LGBT tobacco control experts to

introduce this issue at the last DOH-PR sponsored Tobacco-Obesity Summit. This was probably the first time an LGBT perspective, including preliminary local survey results, were presented to the tobacco control and public health communities of the Island.

An equally valuable opportunity took place in May 2009 at the *LGBT Health Forum: Experiences in Tobacco Control* during the III Congress Against Homophobia, a week-long event sponsored by the local LGBT group, Puerto Rico Para Tod@s (Puerto Rico For All - www.prparatodos.org). The Forum was sponsored by NLTCN and the School of Dental Medicine-UPR and with support from the DOH-PR we collected more responses for the LGBT community health-tobacco survey and distributed Networks' brochures and publications to a crowd of mostly medical students and several local Coalition members. The Forum provided a space to rally allies and educate the audience on realities of oppression and discrimination among the LGBT community and how it directly affects healthcare access and services.

Many local advocates have showed interest as we have been navigating and supporting these events in further discussing LGBT health among LGBT Puerto Ricans and their allies. Merging tobacco control efforts with other health and social justice issues (while sharing limited resources during funding cuts) will be a sensible approach to engage the LGBT community in Puerto Rico. Local advocates will seek support from the CDC National Networks and other national gay groups to move work forward in Puerto Rico.

We thank the sponsoring groups for providing unconditional support to achieving our vision and participate in these events. To all the people that have helped the work move forward, including Island volunteers (Jose Santini, Wilfredo Santana, Fernando Sosa, Thomas Bryan, Sophia Isabel Marrero, Michael Roldan, Rahul Correa, and Carmín Maldonado), NLTCN staff and members (Jeannette Noltenius, Aida McCammon, Yanira Arias, and JC Velazquez), LGBT Tobacco Control Network staff (Scout, Gustavo Torrez, and Sasha Kaufmann) and its fabulous print publications and online resources, Puerto Rico Department of Health-Tobacco Control and Prevention Division staff (Antonio Cases and Alex Cabrera), the members of the Puerto Rico Tobacco Free Coalition, the medical students and staff at the University of Puerto Rico-Medical Science Campus, and all the local Puerto Rico LGBT groups and individuals that have been supportive and excited to pursue this work.

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