



For Immediate Release

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ETHNO-RACIAL COMMUNITY COALITION SHOWCASES REPORT ON SUCCESSFUL HIV STIGMA REDUCTION INTERVENTION RESEARCH

Government statistics and research studies have consistently shown that racial minority and newcomer communities bear a disproportionate burden of HIV. Previous research also showed that HIV stigma and discrimination, and the lack of HIV champions within ethno-racial communities are critical barriers that undermine effective HIV prevention education and support amongst these communities. In response to these needs, the Committee for Accessible AIDS Treatment (CAAT), a coalition of over 30 legal, health and HIV service organizations, launched the CHAMP intervention study (2012-2015) to evaluate two innovative and culturally relevant trainings to facilitate HIV stigma reduction and community leadership-mobilization amongst Asian, Black and Latino communities in the Greater Toronto Area.

CHAMP: Community Champions HIV/AIDS Advocates Mobilization Project was undertaken by a community-campus research partnership with members from ethno-racial AIDS service organizations, health service organizations and academic institutions. It was led by Drs. Alan Li, Kenneth Fung and Josephine Wong, and funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR).

The study engaged 66 ethno-racial leaders from faith, media and social justice sectors and people living with HIV (PLHIV) in two stigma-reduction training programs: Acceptance Commitment Therapy Training (ACT) and Social Justice Capacity Building (SJC). Participants were followed for a year and data on changes in the participants' attitudes and behaviors as well as their actual engagement in HIV prevention, PLHIV support and stigma reduction activities were collected.

“Although some stigma interventions have been carried out worldwide, CHAMP is unique because it is one of the very few studies that addressed not only HIV but other social stigmas through individual as well as community empowerment,” said Dr. Josephine Wong, co-principal investigator and Associate Professor at Ryerson's Daphne Cockwell School of Nursing. “CHAMP was innovative in that it combined the psychotherapeutic approach of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) with Social Justice Capacity Building (SJC) training to promote acceptance, self-compassion, social awareness and mutual empathy amongst participants to fight different forms of stigma and discrimination.”

CHAMP results showed that the interventions were effective in reducing HIV stigma and increasing participants' readiness to take action towards positive social change. Over a period of 9 months after completing the training, CHAMP participants had engaged in 1090 activities that included: addressing HIV related stigma and discrimination, championing social justice, promoting care and support of people living with HIV, building community networks and promoting resilience.

Dr. Alan Li, a HIV primary care physician and the principal investigator of CHAMP attributes the study's success to the way it broke the cycle of stigma and denial that made HIV an invisible issue for many ethnoracial communities. “Stigma creates a hostile environment that makes it really difficult for people living with HIV to disclose their status and participate fully in their own cultural communities,” said Li. “This invisibility perpetuates the myth that HIV does not affect our people, which leads to denial and further stigmatizes and marginalizes people living with HIV.” Li emphasized that having people living with HIV in leadership roles in CHAMP and effectively engaging leaders who play important roles in the lives of our community members were critical processes that broke down many barriers and reduced stigma at the community level.

Henry Luyombya, the coordinator of the CHAMP study and a community leader with lived experience of HIV echoes the sentiment, “For many of the leaders from faith-based organizations, arts and media and social justice sectors who engaged in our study, it was the first time they got to know real people living with HIV in their own communities. Many told me that CHAMP was an incredibly powerful experience that broke down many stereotypes and prejudices.” Luyombya attributed the success of CHAMP to the experiential training activities that promoted genuine human connections and inspired the participants to take collective action. “CHAMP also increased my capacity to pursue a career in health research and social work, and opened up opportunities for further engagement with marginalized communities,” said Luyombya.

Although CHAMP as a research study is completed, the enthusiasm and spirit of the participants have not diminished. Many have formed networks to continue to advance HIV championship. Four projects driven by CHAMP participants are continuing: working on issues related to HIV and aging, creating public education tools on stigma reduction, media training, and building social networks to support broader social justice issues.

Beyond the research itself, the impact of CHAMP has been far and wide. “The CHAMP model has generated major interest and inspired many follow up actions, both within the HIV sector and in broader health fields. Some members of our team have adapted the CHAMP interventions to address mental illness stigma in the Asian Canadian communities, resulting in the *Strength In Unity* project, a \$3-million national research study funded by the Movember Foundation currently underway,” noted co-principal investigator, Dr. Kenneth Fung, Clinic Director of Asian Initiative in Mental Health at the Toronto Western Hospital and Associate Professor at University of Toronto.

Within the HIV sector, CHAMP interventions have been taken up to address issues of mental health, addiction and substance use, and to support stigma reduction strategies amongst provincial networks of HIV educators serving the African and Caribbean communities across Ontario. “In addition, many of our champions have stepped up and taken on leadership roles in the communities, becoming co-founders and leaders of networks like the Ontario Positive Asians and the Canadian Network of People Living with HIV,” added Li. “Going forward, to continue the work of CHAMP, we have built a community alliance that includes AIDS service organizations as well as faith-based partners to explore resources to integrate CHAMP training into programming of our partner agencies.”

A copy of the CHAMP Research Report can be accessed and downloaded via the CAAT website; www.hivimmigration.ca

For interviews and media contacts:

Dr. Alan Li – Email: alanli@inspiract.com

Dr. Josephine Wong – Email: jph.wong@ryerson.ca

Dr. Kenneth Fung – Email: ken.fung@uhn.on.ca

Mr. Henry Luyombya – Tel: (416) 854-8935 or email: luyombya@gmail.com

Ms. Maureen Owino – Tel: (416) 364-2261 ext. 2277 or email: coordinator@hivimmigration.ca
