

WORKING WITH COMMUNITY VENUES AND SOPVs DURING MPOX OUTBREAKS

5 February 2026

Overview

Mpox is continuing to circulate among gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (GBMSM) in Australia and internationally. It is a fundamental principle of community-based health promotion to meet communities where they are, rather than expecting them to come to you. Partnerships with venues and organisations that engage with GBMSM are an essential component of an effective response. Given that sexual transmission remains the predominant form of transmission, this includes venues where GBMSM meet for the explicit or incidental purpose of finding sexual partners.

Context

Australia experienced two mpox outbreaks, in 2022 and 2024, both predominantly affecting gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with menⁱ. Mpox had previously caused sporadic outbreaks in parts of Africa but became a global concern in 2022 with widespread transmission in North America and Europe. Australia successfully contained the outbreaks through rapid public health measures, including vaccination, contact tracing and community engagement. Transmission has largely occurred in sexual contexts among GBMSM.

Venues where GBMSM meet socially and sexually are a vital setting for providing health promotion about mpoxⁱⁱ. Engaging in spaces where large numbers of people congregate, such as bars and clubs is an efficient way to reach people with information about symptoms, prevention and testing. These venues are also settings where people can meet new sexual partners, so having targeted messaging can be particularly impactful.

Sex on premises venues (SOPVs) are also an excellent setting to engage in health promotion on mpox transmission. A proportion of the clientele visiting SOPVs may belong to communities not generally engaged within mainstream sexual health services and who may not identify as being at risk or able to access conventional sexual health servicesⁱⁱⁱ. Although there is limited evidence on mpox transmission within these venues, their customers are sexually active and would benefit from relevant information about mpox. If a person with mpox has visited a venue while infectious, the venue can also assist by disseminating messaging to encourage people to monitor for symptoms and test when appropriate.

Partnership and Community Engagement in Physical Venues

Venues that are frequented by GBMSM are typically businesses that are seeking to provide enjoyable and safe spaces for their customers to connect and engage. Through the HIV response, these venues have regularly demonstrated that they care about the health and wellbeing of their customers and are willing to support health initiatives.

At the same time, health organisations must also recognise that these venues are businesses that must balance the need to be sustainable with their desire to support health initiatives. GBMSM attending community venues appreciate seeing tailored information but also don't want to be bombarded by health messaging, particularly not negatively framed or stigmatising messaging.

When seeking to engage with a community venue on the mpox response, it is essential that health organisations come to those discussions with an open mind for how a collaboration might occur, rather than imposing a rigid model of engagement. It is also important to understand that in larger cities different venues may engage with different segments of the community and it is imperative to engage with diverse venues in order to reach diverse parts of our communities. Community based health promotion organisations are best placed to build trusting relationships with these venues over time.

For the sake of clarity, it must be noted that attempts by public health authorities to close these venues during an outbreak is counterproductive to mpox control. This action would simply mean that sex moves to other settings, where it is more difficult to engage with GBMSM resulting in missed opportunities for health promotion and vaccination. Community venues provide significant psychosocial benefits to the community members accessing them. The facilitation of access to GBMSM who may be at potential risk of exposure and the support to effective health promotion messaging is secondary to this benefit.

Ideas for collaboration

Different venues will be suitable for different types of health promotion. The following list are examples of interventions that have been successfully implemented; however it is important to design responses in direct consultation with the venue/business.

1. Written health promotion

The most common form of health promotion that has occurred in community-based venues is the provision of written information, most commonly through posters that alert people to a particular health issue and how to get more information. This has been used for decades in the context of HIV and was effective during the 2022 and 2024 mpox outbreaks. It is important to note that space for information may be limited, as venues will also be promoting their own events and messaging, or be selling advertising.

2. In-person outreach

Another form of engagement that may be considered is physical outreach into venues. Peer-based outreach has been an effective approach in engaging people for the HIV response and is still occurring in

some jurisdictions. Resourcing regular outreach can be a challenge for community-based organisations, so it is more typically used for special events or if a particular need arises. Outreach can also be a collaboration between community-based organisations and public health services, for instance local health districts (or equivalents).

3. Sponsored events

Health organisations can also seek to sponsor specific events at venues as a way to promote their messaging. This is a way of increasing the prominence of messaging, for instance through a host/MC/drag queen providing information directly to customers, as well as providing opportunity for additional advertising.

4. Vaccination services

It is also possible to directly provide vaccination through community venues^{iv}, particularly building on models of HIV and STI testing^v. This has occurred more regularly at SOPVs rather than other community venues such as bars and clubs. Mpox vaccination occurred at SOPVs in multiple jurisdictions in 2022 and 2024. Providing vaccination directly in these settings can increase uptake by reaching people where they already are. However, it can be resource intensive and logically complex in terms of ensuring a safe and well-lit area for setup and access to staff who are willing to work at the appropriate times etc.).

References

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^v Bennett, C., Knight, V., Knox, D., Gray, J., Hartmann, G., & McNulty, A. (2016). An alternative model of sexually transmissible infection testing in men attending a sex-on-premises venue in Sydney: a cross-sectional descriptive study. *Sexual Health*, 13(4), 353-358.