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Virgin Bathhouse Tours

Programming Connection

Case Study



Organization: AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT)

Region: Toronto, Ontario

Prepared: 2010

Quick Facts

Goal (immediate)	To empower men to negotiate safer sex in a bathhouse setting
Goal (ultimate)	To reduce sero-conversion rates by encouraging men to practice safer sex in popular environments in which public sex is practiced
Population	Men who have sex with men
Participants	Men who have not visited a bathhouse but have expressed interest in doing so and/or men who have recently identified as gay, bisexual or MSM
Type of Program	Workshop
Setting	Bathhouse(s) and another "neutral" space (i.e., meeting room, classroom, etc.)
Required Resources	Two qualified facilitators Access to 1 "neutral" space and at least 1 bathhouse Print materials Print ad and/or fliers
Scope and Duration	10-15 participants at each 3.5- to 4-hour session
Date Started	2004
Region	Toronto, Ontario

Recruitment	Advertising in media, neighbourhoods and establishments frequented by gay, bisexual and MSM
Challenges	Engaging ongoing support of bathhouse owners/managers and retaining their support
Evaluation	Comments from participants

What is the program?

Virgin Bathhouse Tours is a community skills-building program based at the [AIDS Committee of Toronto \(ACT\)](#) in partnership with Toronto bathhouses. The tours—which occurred in three stages over 3.5 to 4 hours—were designed to help gay, bisexual and MSM who expressed interest in going to bathhouses to make informed choices about visiting these establishments, participate safely in sexual activity on their premises while enhancing their enjoyment of the bathhouse experience, and communicate more effectively with other patrons to better negotiate safer sex without sacrificing pleasure. The program, which was open to both HIV-positive and HIV-negative men, has not been offered since 2009, but may be offered again as resources permit.

Why Was the Program Developed?

Men who have sex with men—whether gay, bisexual or questioning—are faced with a wide variety of options for sexual expression, including gay bathhouses (or saunas). These businesses provide an environment where gay and other MSM (whether they identify as gay or not) can meet socially and sexually, making bathhouses a potentially safer alternative to finding sex in public places (parks, washrooms, etc.) as well as a unique setting in which to provide education to gay, bisexual and MSM.

Men who have only recently been introduced to the bathhouse setting are often not fully equipped with the knowledge and experience to make the most informed choices about healthy sexual activity in this environment.

Through their outreach activities, ACT staff and volunteers routinely engage men in conversations about health and wellness with the purpose of encouraging the safest sexual encounters possible. In the process, ACT identified three key issues:

- Uncertainty exists – some men had specific questions, concerns and even fears about negotiating safer sex in bathhouses.
- Uncertainty can lead to risk – men visiting bathhouses while faced with uncertainty can easily put their sexual, emotional and physical health at risk.
- Experiences of rejection can lead to risk – some men who had previously faced rejection in the bathhouse environment expressed difficulty negotiating safer sex with men who expressed interest in them.

An informal overview of gay men’s outreach programs in North America and the UK indicated to ACT that while some organizations had conducted information sessions for gay men in public sex spaces, a program to specifically familiarize men with bathhouses with the purpose of increasing resiliency and empowerment did not yet exist.

To fill the gap, the gay men’s health program staff at ACT designed a three-part tour agenda based on the peer-led approach to workshops ACT had perfected while designing and delivering sex-positive programs for gay and bisexual men in Toronto.

How Does the Program Work?

Location

To achieve its goals, ACT needed to successfully engage a bathhouse and arrange access to its space. Through its ongoing long-term outreach efforts, ACT had already established strong and long-standing relationships with a number of bathhouses in Toronto. Working within this context, the gay men’s program coordinators developed a short proposal for what they hoped to develop and pitched it to local bathhouse owners.

The proposal included the following components:

- Concise, informative outline of the project
- Clear explanation of goals and objectives
- Proposed times and dates
- Proposed duration of time spent in the bathhouse during each tour
- Explicit assurance that tours would never be disruptive to patrons
- List of proposed promotional activities to include the bathhouse name
- Description of sex-positive nature of project and organization
- Outline of benefits to business (potential new clients, positive community perception, positive patron experiences, etc.)
- Acknowledgement of the business' unique role in enabling social change in ways not possible by community sector alone
- Friendly reminder of the business' responsibility to patrons and the community

Engagement and Recruitment

To raise broad awareness about the tours and to reach participants, the Virgin Bathhouse Tours staff developed an ad, which promoted the tour as sexy and fun while clearly indicating it was an educational event and not a "sex party." ACT promoted the tour on its website, in local gay print publications and in gay venues, bars and bathhouses. Men who were interested in participating were asked to call the ACT program coordinator, who qualified participants and scheduled tour dates.

Workshop Structure

Each Virgin Bathhouse Tour took the form of a three-stage workshop involving the participation of 10 to 15 men.

Stage One:

Facilitators established a safe workshop environment with a 45-minute ice-breaking Q&A session led by one trained staff person and one volunteer. This session provided an opportunity for men to meet each other and ask questions in a neutral space before they toured the potentially intimidating space of the bathhouse. Facilitators also reminded participants at this stage that the tour was not a sex party and that clothing was not optional!

Examples of topics covered:

- Introduction to bathhouses
- Brief history of bathhouses
- Dispelling of bathhouse myths (e.g., "Everyone at the baths has unsafe sex.")
- Introduction of HIV and STI information that focused on making safer sex part of fun sex
- Establishment of ground rules for behaving discreetly and respectfully during the tour

Stage Two:

Participants and facilitators toured two local bathhouses for approximately 45 minutes each. Groups were limited to 15 men, as larger groups were likely to make bathhouse patrons feel intruded upon. Tours were held in the late morning or early afternoon when there were likely to be fewer patrons present, and conversation with participants was conducted primarily in brightly lit common areas of the bathhouses away from patron's rooms or other areas where men were likely to be engaged in sexual activity.

During the tour, participants visited different areas of each venue, were given quick tips for becoming acclimatized to the environment, talked about STIs (including HIV) and participated in fun and informal role-playing activities related to "cruising" and negotiating safer sex. During the visit, facilitators ensured that participants were respectful of bathhouse patrons.

Examples of topics covered:

- How to rent a room

- Where to find condoms and STI information
- How to introduce condoms and lube in a non-verbal environment
- How different bathhouses attract different clientele
- How to become acclimatized to dark spaces
- How to interpret bathhouse “language” (i.e., closed doors, body language, etc.)
- How to respectfully manage unwanted advances
- How to interpret and respond to rejection
- How to make safer sex part of enjoying the bathhouse experience
- What kind of drugs might be found in the bathhouse and what are the risks
- Issues faced by men from different socio-ethnic communities in the bathhouse setting

“When a guy walks into a bathhouse, he might feel like people are rating him on his body—and they often are! This can be challenging to deal with; learning to manage rejection (how to give rejection and how to get it) is not easy. It requires confidence. On a tour it is important to discuss how to be respectful of others and how a rejection to one’s self may not be personal.” -John Maxwell, ACT

Stage Three:

To provide closure to participants, the facilitators and participants returned to the neutral space where the tour began for a 30- to 40-minute debrief to discuss what they liked and did not like about the experience as well as any lingering questions or concerns. Participants were given a Handy Dandy How-To Handbook on “cruising” as a take-away resource. Please see the [Program Materials](#) section to download this resource.

Partnerships

ACT partnered with the Centre for Spanish Speaking Peoples (CSSP) to deliver the tour more effectively to Spanish-speaking men and with Asian Community AIDS Services (ACAS) to deliver the tour more effectively to men from East Asian and South East Asian communities. In both cases, the tours were offered in English, facilitated by one staff member from ACT and one from the partnering agency (with simultaneous translation provided in some cases). Both partner organizations actively promoted the program and recruited participants.

Required Resources

Human resources

Two facilitators who are:

- Gay or bisexual
- Comfortable in bathhouses
- Able to design and facilitate sex-positive workshops
- Comfortable discussing issues related to sex in plain language and in a non-judgmental manner
- Knowledgeable about issues related to gay men’s sexual health
- Knowledgeable about HIV and STI prevention and transmission

Material resources

- Print materials and notes for facilitators
- [Handy Dandy How-To Handbooks](#) as a take-away resource

Financial resources

Not including staff time, it cost ACT approximately \$600 to run one tour:

- \$100 for refreshments, flip charts, note pads, etc.
- \$500 for print ad in local gay paper

Barriers to Implementation

Often, only larger cities in Canada have bathhouses catering to gay and bisexual men. While ACT has long-standing positive mutually beneficial relationships with many of the bathhouses in Toronto, some bathhouses are less interested in partnering with an AIDS service organization. It is often necessary to spend a great deal of time forming a relationship with a sex-on-premises venue. Even after such a relationship has been formed, the staff of a bathhouse may change and the new manager may not understand the rationale for the program, resulting in the need for new negotiations.

Evaluation

No formal evaluation of the Virgin Bathhouse Tours was conducted; however, the program was immensely popular and the responses observed by the program manager and coordinators were overwhelmingly positive.

Based on comments from participants during the Virgin Bathhouse Tours, ACT believes that the project has successfully changed some participants' attitudes toward bathhouses, increasing their capacity to have safer sex in a bathhouse environment. Nevertheless, facilitators acknowledge that they are limited in their ability to measure how long this positive effect will last and how the skills gained on the tour actually play out in bathhouse interaction.

The men who participated were not followed up with due to concerns from participants about sharing highly personal bathhouse experiences. In the event that the program is reinitiated, ACT may query new participants to ask them if the topics to be covered in the program remain relevant and if any topics should be added or expanded upon.

Learned and Confirmed

- Bringing HIV education into a popular environment can increase engagement
- Creating relationships with businesses where sex occurs can lead to new opportunities for HIV prevention outreach
- HIV education can successfully involve the participation of both HIV positive and HIV negative men
- HIV education can take a "sex-positive" approach while responding seriously to real fears and concerns
- Addressing participants' personal feelings about rejection, body image, etc. plays an important role in successful HIV education

Program Materials

- [Virgin Bathhouse Tours' Frequently Asked Questions](https://www.catie.ca/sites/default/files/Q&A.pdf) (<https://www.catie.ca/sites/default/files/Q&A.pdf>)
- [Cruising: The ins and outs of hooking up for gay and bisexual men \(Handy Dandy How-To Handbook\)](https://www.catie.ca/sites/default/files/26034.pdf) (<https://www.catie.ca/sites/default/files/26034.pdf>)

Other Useful Materials

Information found on the CATIE website

- [Information on sexual health and safer sex](http://www.catie.ca/en/prevention/sexual-health) (<http://www.catie.ca/en/prevention/sexual-health>)
- [Information on prevention for gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men](http://www.catie.ca/en/gmshkc) (<http://www.catie.ca/en/gmshkc>)
- [CATIE Ordering Centre: Resources for gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men](http://orders.catie.ca/index.php?cPath=14_53) (http://orders.catie.ca/index.php?cPath=14_53)

Resources

[Public Health Information for Toronto Bathhouses](#)

2008, Toronto Public Health

Guidelines and manuals

English

[More information](#)

(<https://www.catie.ca/en/resources/public-health-information-toronto-bathhouses>)

[Below the Belt: A gay men's guide to cocks and balls](#)

2009, Terrance Higgins Trust

Client resources

English

[More information](#)

(<https://www.catie.ca/en/resources/below-belt-gay-mens-guide-cocks-and-balls>)

[The Bottom Line: All you'll ever need to know about your arse and his](#)

2009, Terrance Higgins Trust

Client resources

English

[More information](#)

(<https://www.catie.ca/en/resources/bottom-line-all-youll-ever-need-know-about-your-arse-and-his>)

[Some resources on sex in sex venues](#)

2008, ACON

Report

English

[More information](#)

(<https://www.catie.ca/en/resources/some-resources-sex-sex-venues>)

[An Ordinary Night Out: A report on the research project Pivotal, Peripheral or Positional: Understanding SOPVs \[Sex on Premises Venues\] for Intervention.](#)

2008, Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University

Report

English

[More information](#)

(<https://www.catie.ca/en/resources/ordinary-night-out-report-research-project-pivotal-peripheral-or-positional-understanding->)

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