

Project Silk

PENNSYLVANIA

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Project Silk is a practice-centered pilot project targeting young adult African American MSM and transgender people aged 13-29. A partnership between the Pennsylvania Department of Health and the University of Pittsburgh, Project Silk's hallmark feature is the provision of a safe, youth-centered space, open four nights per week, in downtown Pittsburgh. A social worker is available on site to connect youth to key ancillary services including housing/shelter, employment and medical care. HIV testing and linkage to care is available during drop-in hours and by request in a private office, and is enhanced by a modified version of the social network strategy – a community-based strategy for identifying persons with undiagnosed HIV infection. The space includes a mix of structured programming, such as civic engagement discussion groups, as well as unstructured time for youth to practice dance moves and work on presentation effects for house balls. In addition, Project Silk is designing, implementing, and evaluating a novel behavioral intervention, called Future Selves, which utilizes existing House and Ball Community event structures to help youth envision, embody and attain positive futures.

Project Silk is underpinned by a youth development approach that involves young adults in every aspect of programmatic planning and creates leadership opportunities for those involved. For example, the youth advisory board and peer staff were involved in choosing the project name, painting and decorating the space, and providing framework and feasibility assessments of the planned Future Selves intervention. The Project Silk model may be relevant to other states with mid-size urban areas with limited HIV prevention resources and high localized HIV infection rates among hard-to-reach youth populations.

