



**Speech by MPOWER Programme Manager, Adam Shanley, at the launch of MPOWER, 20<sup>th</sup> February 2020, at the Irish Museum of Modern Art**

In the planning of the MPOWER Programme launch we gave great consideration to what is contained within this space and the wider museum.

The work of Derek Jarman upstairs is profoundly poignant and unapologetic in its representation of HIV and AIDS in life and death. It grounds us in the reality of why we are gathering here today - just as it was when Jarman received his diagnosis in 1986, HIV still disproportionately affects gay and bisexual men and the associated stigma and discrimination persists today. Jarman used his art to respond, raise awareness and to empower. So, we thought it to be an appropriate fit.

Club CHROMA, where we stand now, created by Niall Sweeney, is a beautifully vibrant representation of how our community has responded in the past. Filling the room with projections of 30 years of Alternative Miss Ireland, which, was instrumental in raising funds for HIV and AIDS related programmes including those at HIV Ireland, then known as Dublin AIDS Alliance. Again, an appropriate fit.

We also gather on an important date. Today, we remember The Diceman, Thom McGinty who passed away on this date 25 years ago. Often known as one of Dublin's true characters, Thom was a pioneering HIV activist. His appearance on the Late Late Show in 1994 when he spoke openly about living with HIV was a ground-breaking moment in Irish television history and in our social history as gay men.

And so, it's in the surroundings of a legacy of hard-fought protest, dazzling queerness and righteous activism that I am very proud to introduce the MPOWER programme.





MPOWER is a peer-led and community-based response to the sexual health and well-being needs of gay and bisexual men.

We aim to empower gay and bisexual men with sex-positive, judgement-free, and harm-reduction based responses to our sexual health and well-being needs.

The MPOWER Programme is already delivering services in our community:

Many of you will already know of our community-based rapid HIV testing service. Where we offer testing in places that are familiar and at times that are convenient to gay and bi men. Bars, clubs, saunas on evenings and weekends. Our aim is to remove as many barriers to testing as we can and in doing so making testing for HIV normal and accessible.

The most important element of the service, and indeed the MPOWER Programme as a whole, is that it's peer-led. Gay and bi men offering a service and a space for other gay and bi men. When I am delivering training to new volunteers the burning question for volunteers is "What do I say or do if it's a reactive result". Of course, there are things that we must cover with that person but my primary answer is to rely on your empathy. It takes a particular type of person to volunteer for a programme like this and the prerequisite is empathy and understanding – these guys have it by the bucket load.

We are also delivering outreach services to the community. Offering info and support in places where guys are seeking or having sex, hook-up apps, dating sites, bars, clubs and saunas. We get varying requests for information & support – some are simple and straightforward – "What time does the clinic open" or "it burns what should I do?".





However, Diego and Mark, our outreach workers support some of the most vulnerable gay and bi men. Diego has created an important and trusting connection with male sex workers for example to ensure their access to services and overall wellbeing. Mark, our newest team member engaging men in per-urban and rural areas who would be traditionally considered 'hard to reach', they're only hard to reach if you don't understand their needs – again, why a peer-led approach is really key.

This is only a snapshot of what is being achieved in outreach. We plan on expanding the team this year too. Before moving on I want to give a special thanks to Siobhan O'Dea, manager of the Gay Men's Health Service – originally myself and Diego piloted an outreach service at GMHS, what developed was a huge success and the building blocks for the service we have now, so credit must be paid to her too.

I think it's important to not only highlight what we have done but also what we have planned.

We have received funding to increase community testing by piloting novel and innovative testing opportunities with the aim of reducing the number of gay and bi men who've never tested and to increase repeat testing in the community. Ultimately, with the aim of putting people who receive reactive results on a path to treatment which will keep them healthy and will contribute to ending new HIV infections as people on treatment cannot pass on HIV. And for those who receive a negative result, offer information about the prevention toolkit that is available to them to stay negative.

While testing is an important element of the MPOWER programme, the most urgent issue facing our community is the sexualised use of drugs or Chemsex. GHB and Crystal Meth is having a profound negative effect on our friends, our lovers, our partners and our chosen families. Many in our community are in control of their use and enjoy it recreationally but there's a rising number of those who need our support.





In a post marriage equality Ireland where there is a narrative that rights have been achieved and all should now be equal and good. Low self-esteem, self-worth, depression, addiction, overdose, accidental death and suicide are realities for our peers. The tide of equality may be on the way in, but *all* boats have not risen.

To that end, advocacy and research will be integral to the MPOWER programme.

We've received funding to commence research which will underpin our services with a culturally appropriate evidence base - particularly when we look to create the harm reduction response to drugs and alcohol we so desperately need.

The MPOWER Programme will offer its testing, outreach and support services in English, Portuguese and Spanish with the intention to further expand languages spoken as the programme expands. We have a big and beautifully vibrant queer migrant community in Ireland. We aim to be sensitive to cultural and language differences and so we want to ensure that language doesn't act as a barrier to sexual wellbeing.

Another important consideration of the MPOWER programme is to ensure it's inclusive of all gay and bisexual men. Many trans men also identify as gay or bisexual, in addition non-binary folk who want to access gay -identified services will see the programme reflect their needs. Equally, the programme aims to speak to the needs of men who are questioning their sexuality or indeed have sex with men but prefer to identify as straight or are in heterosexual relationships. These men have sexual health and wellbeing needs that should not, and in this programme, will not be ignored.

So, the MPOWER Programme has an ambitious plan for 2020 and I look forward to sharing and involving you, peers and allies, in that plan.





I want to finish up with a few thank yous.

MPOWER is an initiative of HIV Ireland, an organisation that has worked tirelessly at the forefront of the HIV and AIDS response for over 30 years. The creation of the MPOWER programme is an important commitment by HIV Ireland to continue its leadership in the response to HIV and to the wellbeing of gay and bisexual men in Ireland. With that, I'd like to give great thanks to all of the staff and the board of HIV Ireland for giving me, Diego, Mark, our volunteers and the MPOWER programme a home to grow and develop.

As a peer-led programme, I want to thank Diego and Mark for the incredible dedication they put into their work and on behalf of the hundred of guys they've supported since we started an outreach service – thank you.

Huge thanks to all of the rapid testing volunteers who give their time and their empathy so generously to our community every week and have made uncountable positive impacts on the wellbeing of gay and bi men across the city.

I want to give very very special thanks to the funder of the MPOWER programme, the HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme. They have invested heavily in all aspects of MPOWER, not just by way of funding but also in encouraging the peer-led and community-based model of the programme. I want to pay particular gratitude to Helen, Maeve, Caroline, Anita, Owen and Ray. They've not only been an incredible support in making this programme a reality but also to me professionally and personally.

Thanks also to the team at the HPSC. Their diligent work as data ninjas allows us to better understand HIV and STI trends among gay and bi men. They not only give us a mandate to develop responses but also track the impact of our work.

I want to thank all of the LGBT venues who we partner with to deliver our testing, outreach and in future much more. Thank you to Pantibar, The George, Outhouse, Street 66, The Boilerhouse, GLAMworld, Mother, Sweatbox, Sunday Social and Love Sensation.





Also massive thanks to our clinical partners who work closely with us to ensure we have smooth transition from community to traditional services when needed. The GUIDE clinic, the Mater, Safetynet and many other who we look to create connections with this year. But a special shout out to the Gay Men's Health Service and all of the staff there. They've been a huge support of me but particularly the MPOWER programme. Welcoming any of the men we send their way with the care, compassion and understanding we're so lucky to have as standard in such a vital service.

Community partners are essential – we could not dream of achieving what we intend to without learning from those who have gone before us and in many cases continue to be stalwarts of gay and bisexual men's sexual health. Many thanks to the Gay Health Network for their many years of activism and service to our community over 30 years up to today. And also a thank you to ACT UP Dublin (and Cork) for their constant agitation of those in position of power to do the right thing.

Thank you to GCN for being a champion supporter of the MPOWER Programme and indeed, HIV Ireland. Be sure to pick up a copy of the freshly printed issue – we're splashed all over it. Sincere thanks to the whole team and a special mention for Lisa, she's always a fantastic support and friend, not least over the last few weeks.

Thank you to IMMA for allowing us to use this gorgeous space and for putting in so much energy to making today happen. Caroline, Sean and Sarah have been such a pleasure to work with. So much so that myself and Caroline are already trying to concoct plans to work together more.

Massive thank you to Pantibar in particular Shane, Bruno and (bar staff) for keeping everyone well lubricated this evening and to Wines Direct, who I hope have been able to make it along, they have very generously donated the wine for the event. Thank you.





Nearly there - getting the MPOWER programme into its shiny new shoes to walk into the world would not have been possible without the support of Stephen Moloney and Will St Leger, so thank you for all you have done. Thanks to Babs Daly for her photography skills for the tonight. Thank you to Tonie Walsh for his lovely words and his unwavering support.

Finally, a huge thank you to my family, my Mam and Dad who are here tonight and my little brother Johnathan have shown me nothing but love, support and encouragement – even when I take to national TV or radio talking about gay sex.

Last but by no means least thanks to my boyfriend, Francisco, he'll be delighted to have me back in the evening times, mostly to do the housework though. I love you and thank you.

ENDS.

