**Background:** Prominent models in the risk communication and disaster preparedness literature indicate risk communication messages should not take a one-size-fits-all approach, and should instead be crafted and disseminated in a way that is more accessible, understandable, and culturally relevant to unique communities. The present research investigates the functionality of a novel communication platform which enables two-way dialogue between communicators and diverse communities in order to draft more actionable and salient risk communication messages.

**Research Questions:**

- What is the potential value of utilizing social networking models to facilitate communication between public health and smaller “cliques” within larger community circles?
- How efficacious is the use of novel technology in facilitating communication between public health officials and traditionally disenfranchised communities?
- How well does the proposed mechanism allow for contextualizing and testing risk communication messages among traditionally vulnerable communities?
- What is the role of broadcast media in engaging traditionally hard-to-reach populations such as undocumented immigrants?
- Can the proposed mechanism be used to rapidly disseminate a draft message and gain feedback from the test populations within 24 hours?

**Methodology:**

Organization of the “Cells and Circles” Structure: The research team constructed a novel communication platform and tested its utility for involving communities in draft risk communication messages relevant to their demographic (Figure 1).

**Results:**

**Overall:**

- 29 unique focus groups were held over 6 months: 15-in-person, 11-videoconference, and 3 as telephone conference calls.
- Significantly more females than males participated in the study, at a ratio of almost 2:1.
- “Total Time to Set up and Activate Structure” – averaged about 3 months.
- Coordinators had an average of 54 days to recruit cell captains (Range: 34 to 79 days).
- Captains took an average of 5 days to recruit the minimum number of cell members (Range: 2-7 days).
- A total of 6 out of 16 captains were able to recruit the target of 6 members to all of the three focus groups. Full attendance at all three almost focus group events was not significantly associated with the mode of communication for focus groups one and two.
- Focus groups (either in-person or by videoconference) were well received by participants. 99% indicated that focus groups were a good way to get feedback, and felt they had the opportunity to contribute their thoughts during the event.

**Survey Mode & Participation:**

- A total of 118 surveys were completed, at over 80% participation for each event.
- Overall, 31% of all surveys were completed over the telephone, and 69% online.
- 65% of the homebound and caregivers completed the survey by telephone as compared to 25% and 14% in the urban teenager and PLWHA groups, respectively.

**Mechanism Implementation & Novel Technology:**

The functionality of the hierarchical structure of the communication platform was tested through implementation of three focus group events and two surveys (Figure 2).

- To test the mechanism’s just-in-time (JIT) capability, the third focus group was run with just 24 hours’ notice. To test the utility of different technologies, focus groups were conducted either in-person, by videoconference, or by teleconference.
- Through our collaboration with a Spanish television network, the utility of using a live television broadcast to initiate two-way conversation with undocumented Latin American immigrants was tested. Novel technologies such as use of Netbooks, Interactive Voice Response (IVR), and real-time voting through text-message were also explored.

**Data Collection:** Data collection primarily focused on assessing the functionality and utility of the communication platform. Measurements included (1) the time and effort required to engage communities in the project, (2) differences in respondents’ willingness to participate in the project, (3) the extent to which they contributed, (4) differences in ease of message dissemination, (5) ability to gain feedback for each modification to the communication platform, (6) the pros and cons to different communication methods in the four test communities, and (7) participant feedback regarding the functionality and appropriateness of this mechanism for use in their community.

**Conclusions:**

- It would be possible for a public health department or community-based health organization to implement this Circles and Cells mechanism with one full-time staff member devoted to it.
- When utilizing this structure, a more consistent/frequent engagement would increase participant retention.
- Capitalizing on existing support groups and CBOs with regular meetings enables two-way dialogue between communicators and diverse communities in order to draft more actionable and salient risk communication messages.
- The mechanism was well received by participants. 99% indicated that focus groups were a good way to get feedback, and felt they had the opportunity to contribute their thoughts during the event.

**References:**