

# Logged On and At Your Service: Helping STI Programs Master Popular Digital Tools for Improved Health Care Services

## STD Prevention **SUCCESS STORIES**



Sexually transmitted infection (STI) prevention and treatment programs around the country work hard to reach and provide communities with important STI services. But in this era of the tech-savvy, highly-mobile digital consumer—along with [rising STI rates](#)—sometimes health care providers and other health department staff, such as Disease Intervention Specialists (DIS), need a helping hand to grow and strengthen their technical capabilities.

That's where CDC's [Using Technology to Advance STI Prevention \(UTASP\) Workgroup](#) comes in, offering state and local health departments and other community-based organizations (CBOs) the technical assistance (TA) they need to understand and use the most popular technology that consumers choose for sexual health activities and communication. What is UTASP? A multi-disciplinary workgroup led out of CDC's Division of STD Prevention (DSTDP) that provides TA directly to STI and HIV programs. The workgroup consists of health scientists, public health advisors, and former DIS from DSTDP and CDC's Division of HIV Prevention.

“It's important to speak the ‘language’ of those you're trying to reach. In the case of modern STI prevention and treatment, that involves the ability to reach disproportionately affected people through the technology they use, such as social networking sites, dating apps, and text,” said Rachel Kachur, a Health Scientist in DSTDP and UTASP Co-Lead.

### **Aligning technological expertise with local STI health needs**

“We focus on giving practical assistance to public health departments and other CBOs that helps them reach higher levels of service and support to surrounding communities, especially populations most impacted by STIs,” said Frank Strona, a Public Health Advisor in DSTDP and the UTASP Lead for Technical Assistance. “Our specialty is providing instruction and insight to help understand and master the latest, most frequently used digital technologies, such as popular dating apps, to reach those most at risk of STI and HIV infection. For example, our [mobile app simulator](#), available on the UTASP website, was designed to familiarize DIS with all aspects of modern app navigation to help improve contact tracing and partner services on dating apps. It's one of our most valuable teaching tools.” And it works: a health department in Wisconsin that received UTASP support is seeing an increase in STI screenings thanks to a free ad users are clicking on a popular dating app.

Since **2014**,  
UTASP has  
responded to over  
**400 TA** requests

In 2022, UTASP  
delivered **50+**  
hours of  
online TA

The UTASP  
website had over  
**10,000** views  
last year

## Emphasizing sustainability in outreach

Many communities depend on public health departments and other CBOs for reliable services that meet a number of STI health care needs, and like the communities they serve, each program comes with its own unique set of advantages and challenges. The UTASP team specializes in providing customized TA that considers and adjusts to the unique situation of each organization they help. The ultimate goal is to repurpose or expand existing resources built on the foundations and skills of disease intervention.

“Successful TA skillfully leverages the advantages of a given program to address the challenges they face,” said Kachur. “We use evaluation as the first step to help identify potential barriers and facilitators to incorporating technology into program activities. This helps us find existing assets to leverage to improve chances of success. It’s important to offer support and credit for resources already on hand, which helps create a true collaborative process.” Kachur noted the recent success of drop-in office hours for local programs in Oregon as an example, an initiative that provided additional individualized TA opportunities to existing staff with a series of training sessions UTASP delivered state-wide.

## Hitting the mark locally creates positive impacts nationally

Numerous programs around the country can now tout the benefits of working with DSTDP’s UTASP experts. “There’s probably not a state in the US we haven’t touched with TA support over the years,” said Strona. In 2022 alone, the UTASP team provided TA outreach to over 60 programs

in cities from coast to coast, and several US territories. They also hosted a number of webinars, trainings, and workshops for national and international science and public health professional audiences—all while most members served in leadership roles during recent COVID-19 and mpox national public health emergencies.

While acknowledging the large amount of time and resource commitments that come with most UTASP projects, both Kachur and Strona agree that having a broad reach is a source of pride for the workgroup because of the positive change that happens in communities when they help programs sharpen their technological skills.<sup>1</sup>

“It all comes down to ethics,” said Strona. “With STI rates steadily rising, local public health departments and other CBOs that deliver modern, targeted health care services will be better positioned to meet communities where they are. We feel that not offering this guidance short-changes these programs, preventing them from having more success in decreasing risks for STI and HIV infection. It’s a fundamental part of the TA process—fulfilling an obligation to help programs reach their full potential in community care and outreach.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Other current UTASP members: Allie Coor, Dayne Collins, and Jennine Kinsey

<sup>2</sup> For more information or if interested in sharing your expertise with UTASP, please send an email to [FHS3@cdc.gov](mailto:FHS3@cdc.gov)



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