

IMPLEMENTATION OF Individual Donor Assessment

Individual Donor Assessment Primer

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recently issued new evidence-based guidelines calling for an individual donor assessment (IDA) approach to determining blood donor eligibility. This eligibility change represents a significant step in the blood community's continuing journey to build a more diverse, equitable and inclusive community of donors.

The new screening criteria will ask all donors about risks, including sexual contact with a new partner or with multiple partners. Sex-positivity views all consensual sexual acts between adults as normal and healthy and aims to remove shame and awkwardness from conversations around sex. Approaching conversations with donors who will be sharing personal details about themselves in a sex-positive, non-stigmatizing way is crucial. It is important that all blood center staff are equipped to talk about the new individual donor assessment screening criteria without reacting negatively or expressing judgement.

To create a harm-free and inclusive experience for all, the following key messages will help prepare you for questions you might receive from donors and equip you to have sex-positive conversations.

Self-Awareness and Bias

- We all have biases, make assumptions and have been exposed to stereotypes (many of them negative) about sex, sexuality and gender. We can choose to notice our thoughts and feelings when they arise and take steps to counteract biased behavior.
- Slow down to combat both conscious and unconscious bias.
- Surface unconscious biases by observing your thoughts, feelings and emotions. Consider asking yourself, "Why am I thinking this way about this person or group?" "Why am I reacting differently to this person than I did others?" "What lived experiences or identities does this person have that I hold negative stereotypes on?"
- Reflect on and question the stereotypes and negative assumptions you may hold. Increased self-awareness results in a more inclusive environment.
- Counteract bias over the long term: Listen, learn and reflect.

Sharing and Using Pronouns

- Early identification and proper pronoun usage have been recognized as a prudent first step to establishing effective communication and trust with transgender and non-binary individuals.
- Avoid misgendering; don't assume the person's gender based on their name or appearance.
- Use gender-inclusive language: avoid terms like "Miss," "Sir" or "Ladies and Gentlemen."
- Instead, use language like "Hi there," "Hey everyone" or "Excuse me, folks."
- It's ok to ask about pronouns! You can say something like "Hi, my name is _____ and I use the pronouns. How would you like me to address you?" This invites the donor to share their name (which may be different than the legal name on file) as well as their pronouns or anything else they would like you to know about them.
- Consider adding pronouns to your name tag and email signature.
- Language can be complex and at times everyone makes mistakes. Perfection isn't expected, the important thing is to focus on relating to the person you are speaking to with kindness, empathy and authenticity. If you make a mistake, a simple apology or "thanks for correcting me" and a sincere effort to use the correct term/pronoun/name moving forward is all that is needed to relate to the person to whom you are speaking.

About Apologies

- We are human and we will make mistakes. Apologies need not be long, drawn-out or emotional. Excessive apologizing can create additional discomfort and should be avoided.
- If you make a mistake and offend someone, acknowledge, apologize briefly and move on.

Responding to Upset or Angry Donors

- The vast majority of your interactions with donors will be positive. However, there may occasions when new and existing donors get upset for various reasons. They may be frustrated at the slow pace of change, angry that they have been unable to donate previously, uncomfortable or offended by the new sexual behavior-based screening questions, or they may get upset upon being deferred.
- In all cases, the model for responding is Thank, Acknowledge, Inform.

THANK	ACKNOWLEDGE	INFORM
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thank you for voicing your concerns/questions/frustrations. • We appreciate all feedback to help us improve what we're doing. • We really appreciate your patience with this process. • Thank you so much for coming in today. We really appreciate it. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I hear that you are very upset/frustrated/angry. That's totally understandable. • I'm sorry that this experience has been so difficult/painful/frustrating for you. • I can understand why you are upset, and I am sorry you feel this way. • I know this questionnaire is long and asks lots of sensitive questions. I'm sorry about that. • I understand that these questions can be uncomfortable to answer. • It's completely natural to feel uncomfortable/nervous/etc. • We truly understand that being turned away from donating blood can leave any donor with a sense of frustration and disappointment. • We recognize that eligibility criteria for men who have sex with men, transgender and non-binary donors is a particularly sensitive issue affecting many who have experienced longstanding marginalization and stigma. • We recognize that the slow pace of changes to donor criteria that still exclude many gay, bisexual, other men who have sex with men, and some trans, non-binary, and gender diverse people, have been painful and frustrating for many. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are working diligently toward greater inclusivity for donors while maintaining a safe and adequate supply of blood products for the patients we serve. • The questions being asked are not about judgement. All information is kept confidential. • We are continuing to take steps to address systemic barriers, further modify our practices and policies and cultivate a donor base that more fully and equitably reflects our country's diverse population. • We want our donation center to be safe and welcoming for everyone and to allow as many people to safely donate as possible. • We do have policies in place to prevent HIV transmission. We are confident in our evidence informed policies and their ability to ensure a safe blood supply. • Scientific evidence indicates that it is recent and specific sexual behaviors that increase the chance of sexually transmitted infections, not sexual orientation. • Donor eligibility criteria are developed based on strict FDA requirements that focus on both donor and patient safety. • FDA has formally announced that the current scientific evidence supports the policy change while maintaining the safety of the blood supply.

THANK	ACKNOWLEDGE	INFORM
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Donor screening criteria is a necessary tool because even the best donor testing available today might not detect an HIV in a recently infected person. Screening criteria exist to help prevent the possibility that a recently infected donor could unknowingly transmit HIV through blood transfusion because donor test might not detect the low level of virus shortly after infection. While individual donor assessment criteria are an improvement, some people will still be deferred. This isn't a judgement about sexual practices or about donors personally. As science and technology evolve so will our organization and policies.

- Avoid getting upset or defensive: staying calm and respectful is the best way to defuse the situation.
- It is essential to use a supportive, non-judgemental approach both verbally and non-verbally.
- Avoid word choices that provoke defensive reactions.
- Maintain a neutral tone, posture and facial expression. Show empathy through words and body language.
- In moments of tension and emotion, remember the P-U-R-R Model:
 - a. Pause: take a moment to check in with yourself and your thoughts and feelings
 - b. Understand: your goal, other's feelings, needs, and concerns
 - c. Regulate: your thoughts, words, behaviors based upon your choices
 - d. Respond: calmly and mindfully to the situation

Allyship and Responding to Non-Inclusive/Discriminatory Comments

- Intervene when you witness offensive behavior or language from anyone, donor and colleagues alike.
- Emphasize that inappropriate language and/or behaviors will not be tolerated.
- Stress that blood centers are safe and inclusive spaces: we are grateful to donors and prospective donors of all ages and backgrounds and welcome them to donate.
- Provide facts to counteract misinformation (see “Inform” section in table above).
- Your psychological safety is important. Staff must feel included, safe to do their job and safe to challenge the status quo without being embarrassed, marginalized or punished.
- If you cannot engage in a way that maintains your psychological safety when faced with non-inclusive/discriminatory comments, ask for help from a supervisor. This is especially important for employees who are LGBTQ+ or from other equity-deserving groups.
- For colleagues who are not LGBTQ+ or another equity-deserving group, it is a strong gesture of allyship to:
 - 1) speak up and ask for help from a supervisor when you witness offensive behavior or language, and
 - 2) provide support to an individual who appears distressed or uncomfortable.

Feeling Uneasy?

- You have a challenging role as the main point of contact for our donors.
- Some of you may feel confident, while others may be feeling a bit apprehensive about these changes and the situations you may encounter in the screening booth.
- It's normal and natural for you to feel nervous, uncomfortable, frustrated, or any other emotion, and it's important that you take steps to manage these emotions, for your own benefit as well as for donors.
- Nervousness is often a non-verbal expression that can be interpreted by the donor as being uncomfortable with the donor themselves, as opposed to one's own discomfort with providing culturally sensitive care. The best way to manage nervousness is to be empathetic, use words that the donor uses for themselves, apologize simply if you make a mistake and focus on relating with the donor.
- Donors who are sharing personal details about themselves are likely nervous or feeling vulnerable as well. They trust that we can have conversations about the questions we are asking. Focus on the needs of the donor and relating to the donor in a kind, authentic, engaging and empathetic way.
- Keep providing the excellent service you already provide.
- Talk to your supervisor about any unanswered questions/concerns that you have.

AABB partnered with Canadian Blood Services in the development of these materials.

Additional information and resources on individual donor assessment is available at aabb.org/ida.