Another Reason HIV Rates Might Increase in the Era of COVID-19

We've reported about STI clinics closing, but harm reduction advocates are also raising alarms—while trying to reach those most vulnerable.

April 30, 2020 By Trent Straube

With the nation's health care resources devoted to fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, many experts in the field worry that gains recently made against the HIV epidemic could be lost, resulting in an increasing number of HIV cases.

One area of concern, according to harm reduction advocates interviewed by ABC News, is the shuttering of needle exchange programs during the coronavirus crisis. (Over half the needle exchanges in Ohio have closed down due to a lack of funding.) Not only do syringe exchange programs help prevent the spread of HIV by lowering the number of shared and used needles, but they also often connect clients to other services, such as HIV testing and prevention medication.

"Under a public health emergency like COVID-19, over the past month we have seen a significant drop-off in people's ability to stay connected to us because we're not allowed to provide the wraparound services that have made us successful," Cyndee Clay, the executive director of HIPS, a needle exchange center in Washington, DC, told ABC. "Under these circumstances, it's frustrating, and it means people are going to die. And that's a really heavy thing to think about."

Despite closures and stay-at-home orders, many harm reduction advocates are finding ways to reach their clients. For example, the Atlanta Harm Reduction Coalition now offers mail-in HIV tests, and staff at VOCAL-NY (Voices of Community Activists and Leaders—New York) are giving people who use drugs extra syringes and supplies so they can distribute them among people in their communities.

As Paula Santiago of VOCAL-NY told ABC, "We are going to see an outburst of HIV transmission because of people sharing syringes."

To learn about another way that harm reduction advocates are meeting needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, see "Narcan for Reversing Drug Overdoses Now Available by Mail."

Similarly, clinics specializing in sexually transmitted infections (STIs) have had to cut off or severely limit services, right as the United States faces historically high rates of STIs. To read

about the recent results of a survey by the National Association of County & City Health Officials, see “It’s a Terrible Time for COVID-19 to Strike HIV, STI and Hepatitis Programs.”

In related COVID-19 news, keep in mind that novel coronavirus guidance and concerns for unique populations may vary. For example, see “How Many People With HIV Are Getting COVID-19?” as well as “3 Reasons COVID-19 Poses a Higher Risk for the LGBTQ Population,” “UPDATED: What People With HIV Need to Know About the New Coronavirus” and the similar article for people with cancer.

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