Call to Action

Mariah Wilberg promotes U=U via her state's health agency.

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In 2016, when Mariah Wilberg started working as a communications specialist at the Minnesota Department of Health, she was determined to incorporate the concept of Undetectable = Untransmittable (U=U) into the state health agency's messaging.

"I embarked on a process of figuring out where we were heading in regard to U=U and whether people were receptive to us officially endorsing the campaign and starting to do public education," says Wilberg, an advocate living with HIV.

"After about 10 months of internal discussions, I got the green light for us to become the third state to sign on."

Wilberg was immediately given a budget to launch a U=U campaign for the Minneapolis–St. Paul metropolitan area. In addition, she was tasked with training colleagues on the science backing up U=U and finding an overall consistent language to describe it.

"Not only is there the public health benefit of preventing new transmissions," she says, "but also U=U is the single most important thing that changes how people living with HIV feel about and view themselves."

Wilberg was 19 years old and pregnant when she was diagnosed HIV positive.

"I handled it very well during the pregnancy from a medical standpoint, but after that, I really struggled," she recalls.

At age 25, Wilberg received an AIDS diagnosis while incarcerated.

After her release from prison in 2013, she became involved with the Minnesota AIDS Project (now part of JustUs Health), first as a volunteer and then as a community education and risk-reduction assistant.

The subsequent years included stints as an HIV prevention specialist at the youth-focused organization Face to Face and as a health educator and social media coordinator for the Rural AIDS Action Network.

Being incarcerated under Minnesota's severe drug laws also inspired Wilberg to become involved in criminal justice reform. In 2016, she appeared before the Minnesota Legislature to advocate for reduced prison sentences for low-level drug offenders.

That same year, the legislature significantly reformed its criminal drug laws.

"I like to think of all the people who are now receiving help in their community instead of going to prison as a result of these changes," she says.

Wilberg currently does communications work specifically for the STD, HIV and Tuberculosis Section of the Minnesota Department of Health.

She was recently given a budget for a new 2019 U=U campaign, which she hopes will be a collaborative effort between the health department and its partner organizations.

"This is a call to action to other state health departments," Wilberg says. "Please sign on to the U=U message. It's changing lives."

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