



Changing Laws and Changing Lives

Advocate Lashanda Salinas helped reform Tennessee's HIV criminalization laws.

March 25, 2024 By Lashanda Salinas

I'm an advocate living in the state of Tennessee. I have been living with HIV for 25 years. Last year, I wrote an article sharing how after ending a six-month relationship, I was charged with criminal exposure to HIV and sent to jail. I was offered a plea deal, which I didn't want to take because I knew I was innocent. But taking the plea meant I could go home and be with my family. So I accepted it. But I wasn't told that I would have to register as a sex offender for the rest of my life.

Three years ago, I decided to speak out about my story of being unjustly criminalized because of my HIV status. I decided to use my voice for the people who are afraid to stand up and speak out. I told my case manager at Nashville Cares I did not want anyone to go through what I had been through.

My first assignment was Day on the Hill in Nashville with the Tennessee AIDS Advocacy Network (TAAN), which works with Nashville Cares. I was a nervous wreck because I had to speak to state senators and representatives and tell them my story and let them know how the laws do not match science. I spoke to one senator who did not know that criminal exposure to HIV was against the law. I shared my story and told him how stigmatizing that law is. I started working with more organizations and trying to repeal or amend these laws.

Well, my work paid off, because on May 17, 2023, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee signed a law that removes criminal HIV exposure from the list of offenses that require sex offender registration. (Criminal exposure is still classified as a class C felony, which carries a jail sentence of three to 15 years—the same as vehicular homicide.) The law was to go into effect on July 1.

On July 2 or 3, my best friend and fellow advocate was blowing up my phone. She was calling, texting, emailing and reaching out on Facebook. I called her back, and she told me to go online and check the registry. I did and could not find myself listed. I kept refreshing the page because I thought it was a hoax. But as of July 1, I no longer had to register as a sex offender.

The sun began to shine. There was light at the end of the tunnel I was in. But there is a lot more work to do.

When people started hearing about me getting off the registry, the Lord opened so many doors for

me. My fellow advocates decided to have a celebration day for me on November 1. It was a beautiful night, and I was surrounded by love and support from advocates from the Center for HIV Law and Policy, the Elizabeth Taylor AIDS Foundation's HIV Is Not a Crime Council of Justice Leaders, the Sero Project, Positive Women's Network-USA, Nashville Cares and TAAN. Without these organizations, I would not be where I am today.

To anyone afraid to speak up, know that I am your voice. I will put on the armor of God and fight the stigma for you. My motto is: "Changing Laws and Changing Lives."

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