How Cleveland's HIV Program Lost $1.5M

The Ohio Department of Health did not renew the city's grant for several reasons.

January 8, 2020 By Trent Straube

Cleveland's HIV/AIDS program is out $1.5 million after the Ohio Department of Health decided not to renew those grants to the city, Cleveland.com reports. The funding was cut because city health officials failed to meet important benchmarks, such as testing populations at high risk and filling vacant positions in the program.

The state's health department is seeking bids for a new provider that can meet the city's HIV needs.

According to reports in The Plain Dealer, funds were axed because the city failed to:

- Screen the highest-risk populations, including men who have sex with men (MSM)—primarily young Black men—and injection drug users;
- Quickly follow up on new exposures and notify potential sexual partners;
- Track and submit data on new HIV cases, as Ohio law mandates. For example, the Cleveland program failed to report HIV cases to the state nine out of 12 months.

What's more, the city's HIV program had failed to spend much of the grant money it had received in previous years and neglected to fill important positions that became vacant.

The city had previously claimed that HIV cases were declining, dropping from 162 in Cuyahoga County in 2018 to a total of 131 in 2019. This includes 106 in Cleveland in 2019 and 89 as of December 5, 2019.

However, according to state records, the majority of HIV tests—73%—were performed on heterosexual residents. Of the 9,000 people tested by Cleveland's HIV program in 2018, only 12%

were MSM, and 3.5% were injection drug users.

Health workers with the HIV program also oversee testing for sexually transmitted infections, and the newspaper notes that workers may have been spread thin because they were also dealing with a syphilis outbreak in recent years.

This HIV news is especially troubling because Cuyahoga County is considered one of the HIV hotspots in the United States—the 48 counties (plus Washington, DC, and San Juan, Puerto Rico) that account for more than half the new HIV diagnoses in the country. Two other counties in Ohio—Hamilton and Franklin counties—are on the list.

A federal initiative launched last year titled “Ending the HIV Epidemic: A Plan for America” targets these hotspots with a goal of lowering HIV rates 75% in five years and 90% in the next decade.

Robert Redfield, MD, the director of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), traveled to Ohio last year to meet with public health officials and design local HIV strategies. For more about that, read this POZ article.

And in related news, see “Plans to End the HIV Epidemic at Home and Abroad.”

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