Media-Driven Stigma Continues With New HIV Criminalization Case

The AIDS Foundation of Chicago believes that HIV criminalization laws are no longer relevant.

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Despite the immense progress made in the battle to destigmatize HIV and end HIV criminalization laws, the mainstream media is failing to catch up and join the fight. In some cases, the media's coverage of HIV criminalization becomes the source of stigma.

A new case under an outdated HIV criminalization law in Illinois demonstrates the media's inability to handle sensitive information. But it also complicates the public health sector's efforts to destigmatize HIV among vulnerable communities.

According to a republished police press release, a 25-year-old man was arrested at his place of employment in Chicago's Lakeview neighborhood based on accusations of not disclosing his HIV-status while "engaging in intimate contact" without protection. Not much more information is available in news outlets.

With the lack of reporting, questions and gaps come to mind: What sort of "intimate" contact were they engaging in? Is the accused on HIV treatment and is his viral load undetectable? Is there an actual transmission of HIV?

While those unanswered questions loom, a story published on the website of HIV news source HIVPlus fills in many disturbing details about the case missed by the mainstream media. These include the controversial use of investigative alerts in the arrest, as well as details of gross mistreatment of people living with HIV (PLHIV) while being held in custody.

Coverage of HIV criminalization cases by local news outlets consistently lacks the sensitivity, fact-finding and investigative journalism needed to protect PLHIV and prevent HIV stigma. There is a continuing trend of law enforcement and local news outlets to simply publish accusations and publicize HIV criminalization cases with the name, location and picture of those charged, thus "outing" their HIV-positive status to the community. In the meantime, critical questions go unanswered and an opportunity to educate the public about HIV is also missed. The lack of proper investigative and sensitive reporting only perpetuates HIV stigma and discrimination among communities vulnerable to and living with HIV.

This recent case and many others like it warrants a growing discussion on the need for HIV criminalization laws altogether. These laws were put into place by lawmakers to protect public health during a time of limited understanding about HIV transmission and prevention. Many HIV/AIDS advocacy organizations, including the AIDS Foundation of Chicago, believe they are no longer relevant. In fact, these laws are marring public health efforts to bring an end to new HIV-positive diagnoses.

Cases like this and the ensuing media-driven stigma make it harder for public health workers to do their job. These cases may discourage vulnerable individuals from being tested regularly for HIV, since untested individuals cannot be charged with criminal transmission of HIV. And of course, they perpetuate the historical stigma and discrimination that accompanies HIV/AIDS.

With what we know now about how the virus is transmitted, coupled with major advances in HIV prevention, we have the tools to fight the epidemic. However, it's ultimately up to all of us: Public health, policymakers, law enforcement and the media must work together to win the battle to destigmatize HIV while protecting those who live with the virus.

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/criminalization-chicago-26486-5674