Empowering People Living with HIV and AIDS through Employment

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I was diagnosed with HIV in 1999 and I thought I'd never be able to work again. However, the advent of anti-retroviral therapies (ART) in 1996 made it possible for me and many others living with HIV and AIDS to consider employment. Prior to ART, those who became infected had little hope for a long future. Today, the AIDS-related mortality rate in the U.S. is under 7,000 per year and over 1.2 million HIV-positive people in the U.S. are living full and healthy lives. Accordingly, employment is an essential piece of the coordinated response to HIV and AIDS, and it has both pragmatic and psychological effects.

Agencies that have traditionally served people living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) have mostly focused on medical and psychological issues like prevention, regimen adherence, symptom treatment, and support. However, these agencies are now finding that workforce development is also a critical program and service. My story represents the struggle that tens of thousands of PLWHA face — too often our HIV status makes us feel less than others. Yet when we go back to work, we combat our fears, reclaim control of our lives, and we thrive.

I began working part-time again in 2000 after a long period of unemployment. Substance abuse and then an HIV diagnosis temporarily derailed my career goals and, like many, I was apprehensive about returning to the work force. Soon after, I began taking on more work and was promoted to a full-time position in employment services. Afterward, I was offered a position as the Job Readiness Instructor at Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC). Since starting at GMHC, I have been promoted three times to my current position, Assistant Director of Workforce Development, which seems truly poetic.

Remarkably, I am now in a position to increase awareness about the lack of employment services for the HIV and AIDS community, as well as others living with chronic illnesses and disabilities. What I am most proud of is my ability to understand both sides of the spectrum. I have overcome many obstacles with the help of people who were in positions that allowed them to guide and nurture me. I now have that same power and ability to help others like me.

Workforce Development training in GMHC's SUNY Computer Lab

Employment plays a key role in reducing stigma and improving the psychological health of PLWHA. As one client told me, "I feel happy, I work just as anybody else who is healthy works, so I feel there is nothing wrong with me." Multiple studies have found that PLWHA who are employed are less susceptible to depression and live longer than those who are unemployed. Additionally, a 2008–2009 survey from the New York State Department of Health's AIDS Institute found that 49 percent of respondents reported that their self-care increased since becoming employed. Forty-six percent reported an increase in their CD4 count, 21 percent reported an increase in medication adherence, 34 percent reported a decrease in alcohol and drug use, and 30 percent reported a decrease in unprotected sex.

The lack of PLWHA in the workforce is not due to inability or poor qualifications. It's simply difficult for them to secure a good-paying job, which indicates the increased need for employment services to help them. There are multiple barriers and deterrents for PLWHA to seek and gain employment. A recent study found a significantly low amount of PLWHA participating in employment and training services, primarily due to lack of information about these services. Misinformation regarding loss of public benefits is another deterrent.

Additionally, financial insecurity and income inequality in the workplace are major barriers—one study of employed PLWHA found that 19 percent earned less than $15,000 annually. These findings highlight the need for training and vocational rehabilitation services so that PLWHA have the same access and opportunity for jobs that have higher wages.

I have now been at GMHC for over 11 years and have had the privilege of managing the Back to Work (BTW) program, Moving Ahead Toward Career Horizons (MATCH), and a new pilot demonstration called Realizing Independence through Support and Employment (RISE). These programs provide training and support for people who want to return to work and begin a journey to self-sufficiency. To date, GMHC's Workforce Development programs have helped over 4,000 PLWHA, and it is my goal to continue this work to help many more.

Employment practices and public policies must provide better support for PLWHA, so that health fluctuations do not lead to unnecessary loss of employment. Employment is a fundamental part of life and it means much more than a paycheck — it offers purpose and opportunity to lead an independent, self-directed life, which we are all entitled to and strive to achieve.

In December 2014, I completed my Master's degree in Public Administration. I hope to inspire others who share a similar story to complete higher education and to earn better opportunities that positively impact their livelihoods. I am heartened and honored to be afforded the opportunity to do what I love and what I am extremely passionate about — providing supportive vocational and

job placement assistance to the HIV and AIDS community.

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