



Fighting HIV Among Homeless People

A Boston program suppressed viral load and lowered new HIV cases.

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As Boston's largest homeless service provider since 1985, Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program (BHCHP) has transformed HIV care by delivering lifesaving treatment directly to homeless individuals living with or at risk for HIV. BHCHP's most recent study, "HIV Program Response to Boston HIV Cluster: Data Trends 2019-2023," details the astounding progress the organization has made in recent years, the Boston Globe reports.

Led by Jennifer Brody, MD, MPH, director of HIV services at BHCHP, the study findings show the effectiveness of community outreach in reducing HIV transmission and increasing viral suppression. The program forgoes traditional doctor's appointments and clinic visits and prioritizes nurses who work directly in communities handing out antiretroviral medications to those with HIV.

Dedicated nurses provide care in various unconventional settings, such as street corners, under bridges, down back alleys, community meal programs, overnight drop-in centers, emergency departments and more.

The program launched at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when HIV diagnoses among homeless people who use drugs in Boston spiked from about two a month to more than two dozen cases, according to the Boston Globe.

BHCHP nurses do more than provide HIV treatment to people on the streets. They also draw blood to determine individuals' HIV status and act from there. Outreach teams then follow up to ensure participants continue taking their medication.

The study tracked the number of newly diagnosed people linked to care at BHCHP since 2019. Findings showed that diagnoses peaked in 2021 with about 60 new cases and have been declining steadily since. By the end of 2023, there were fewer than 10 new HIV diagnoses per month.

What's more, as of August 2023, the viral suppression rate for people living with HIV who were receiving outreach-based adherence support was 90%.