HIV Center Awarded $5M for COVID-19 Testing

It's part of a $234 million federal initiative to improve COVID-19 testing among vulnerable populations.

October 5, 2020 By Trent Straube

What are the best ways to encourage COVID-19 testing among underserved populations? Researchers at the Chicago Center for HIV Elimination at the University of Chicago have been awarded a $5 million grant over two years to answer that question, according to a press release from the HIV center. Their work will be located in eight sites in the central United States and focus on Latinos and people who have previously been in jail or prison, two groups with a high burden of COVID-19.

In their efforts to boost COVID-19 testing among those most vulnerable to the new coronavirus, the team at the HIV center will use a social network strategy (SNS) for testing.

"SNS is an evidence-based testing intervention that has been widely used in multiple settings with marginalized individuals who facilitate the recruitment of their social contacts into testing and prevention services," project leader John Schneider, MD, MPH, who is also the director of the Chicago Center for HIV Elimination, said in the press release. "Most commonly used for HIV testing, SNS effectively engages partners, family, friends, coworkers and others who may be susceptible to COVID-19 by further building community partner capacity for COVID-19 testing and prevention services. SNS capitalizes on the individual as a trusted messenger and compensates them for their time, which increases uptake of testing."

The grant was awarded by the National Institutes of Health via its Rapid Acceleration of Diagnostics Underserved Populations (RADx-UP) initiative, which aims to increase COVID-19 testing by supporting 32 institutions across the country—such as the HIV center—so they can study and encourage testing among groups more likely to be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The NIH has disbursed nearly $234 million in grants to efforts to expand COVID-19 testing among targeted populations—notably, African Americans, Latinos, older adults, pregnant women, Native Americans, Alaskan Natives, Native Hawaiians and people who are homeless or incarcerated.

"It is critical that all Americans have access to rapid, accurate diagnostics for COVID-19, especially underserved and vulnerable populations who are bearing the brunt of this disease," said NIH

director Francis S. Collins, MD, PhD, in a separate press statement from the NIH. “The RADx-UP program will help us better understand and alleviate the barriers to testing for those most vulnerable and reduce the burden of this disease.”

As the Chicago center’s Schneider noted, “There’s no point in coming up with a new treatment or test if no one will take it.”

In related news, see “Minorities Are Underrepresented in COVID-19 Clinical Trials,” “Structural Racism Puts Latinos at Risk for COVID-19” and “Why Are Black Communities Hit Hardest by COVID-19?” For more specifics, click on the hashtag topics below.

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