How HIV Stigma Devastated My Life

I was let go abruptly from my job because they found out about my HIV diagnosis.

September 20, 2022 By Michelle Anderson

Like any mom, I wanted to be able to raise my children in safe environments but, because of a felony conviction, I was only able to obtain low paying jobs to take care of them and live in environments that were not safe for myself and my children. The schools my children attended were not equipped with financial resources delegated to help facilitate healthy outcomes.

Each paycheck was completely eaten up in rent, food and transportation and it did not last for the entire month. There were times I had to walk to where I needed to go with all my children in tow, sometimes in the rain.

I was let go abruptly from my job because they found out about my HIV diagnosis. I lost everything! I gave up, relapsed, lost my children, and went back to jail. I needed help, not jail. I am not a criminal. I was sentenced but by the grace of God, I had so much back time for going in and out of jail, my sentence was discharged. With no place to go, I was homeless, motherless, childless and empty. Since I did not have an address or an ID, I could not apply for any services. So, I went back to what I knew and survive the best way I could.

In 2005, I said no more. I moved back to Texas to try to regain my life with the help of my daughter, Cherry. She helped me get an ID so I could apply for employment. I still could not obtain a job paying a livable wage because of a felony I committed in 1996. M application for public housing was also denied due to the felony. A year later, I obtained housing through a program, and found a job working part-time but it was not enough. I didn't want to live the rest of my life on assistance.

Eventually, I received some resources and services needed to help me to stay healthy. In 2008, I volunteered with The Afiya Center and they provided me information on systematic oppression and how it played a role in me not being able to catch a break. I learned how my diagnosis was a result of all those things happening at the same time, which put me at risk for HIV and not based on my behavior. I took what I learned and found my voice. I started working with Afiya, moved into a home and started working on getting my daughter, Chrissy back. The state of Texas said "No!"

Why? Because of my past, my income and my health. Despite serving my time, living in my own home, going back to school, the state violated my right to parent my child, shamed me for obtaining services to help raise my child and wouldn't allow me to make a livable wage because of a felony from more than 20 years ago.

This time I didn't relapse. I got angry! Angry enough to do something about it. What is it going to take for you to get angry enough to move in to action? Reproductive oppression must end for all! When Black women folk are free, everybody is free!

Stigma around my HIV diagnosis cost me that first job. And that loss put me into a dangerous spiral. Fighting stigma is an important of not just ending HIV but keeping fragile lives intact.

The CDC's "Let's Stop HIV Together" campaign has lots of resources to fight stigma and to connect people in need with the resources they need to stay healthy.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/hiv-stigma-devastated-life