Gender Studies

Iris House clients see excellent viral suppression rates. Here's why.

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Support groups help clients succeed at Iris House.

Launched over 22 years ago in Harlem primarily for women living with HIV, Iris House has expanded its services to the South Bronx—with a growing percentage of clients being men—and it now teaches HIV and sexual health education to high schoolers in central New Jersey. Iris House's HIV-positive clients suppress the virus at 250 percent of the national average, and yet its government funding has been slashed. Executive director Ingrid N. Floyd, MBA, explains the situation.

What's behind the success of Iris House's viral suppression rates?
What helps our clients is our support services. You can't just focus on the medical. Providing services such as support groups with like-minded people makes them more accountable. Many of our case managers do home visits. Other support services and hospitals won't do that. But in home visits, we get to understand more of that person; we can see, for example, signs of depression or substance abuse. And we provide services that are gender responsive. Women are going to focus on family and kids first. We don't want you to be able to say, "I couldn't come because I couldn't find a babysitter." So we provide structured recreation and socialization for the kids while their parents are seeing their case managers or taking a workshop.

The New York State AIDS Institute receives federal HIV money, which it then re-directs. Iris House used to be a recipient, but that funding ended in 2014. Why?
The institute funded 13 organizations in New York City under the women's supportive services portfolio. That portfolio was entirely cut. All the funding. What we were told is that because [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] dollars are redirected to young MSM [men who have sex with men], there was a shift in funding priorities. This is a national trend. Even though there's an overall decline in infection rates, African-American women and Hispanic women are the second- and third-fastest growing groups of new infections, after MSM.

How did the cuts affect you?
Some foundations such as the MAC AIDS Fund have stepped up to help, but we're looking for funds to bring programs back that women are asking for, like computer education workshops so people can do research on medications and do job searches online.

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