Meeting the Need for an HIV and STI Clinic That's Fast and Free

This Palm Springs, California, clinic tests and treats sexually transmitted infections, HIV and hepatitis C at no cost. Plus, it offers PrEP.

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When Phyllis Ritchie, MD, worked at DAP (formerly the Desert AIDS Project) in Palm Springs, California, she witnessed an increase in the number of clients who tested positive for HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Having recognized a growing need in the community, last summer she opened PS...Test, a free clinic dedicated to testing and treating STIs, including chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, hepatitis C and HIV.

"I started this clinic because I was disheartened over the years to watch the STI and HIV rate continue to rise despite various interventions," Ritchie, an infectious disease specialist, told POZ. "I felt the big barrier to getting patients tested and treated was financial, so we removed that barrier."

The clinic allows clients to remain anonymous if they prefer and offers quick services. Although it takes a day or two to get most test results, rapid tests are available for HIV and hepatitis C. In addition, PS...Test can help clients start pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) to prevent HIV for free; after initiating a regimen, clients are linked to ongoing PrEP care elsewhere.

"I like to describe us as 'fast-food STI test and treat'—the patients get in and out fast and with kindness," Ritchie said.

"We also are a boutique clinic," she added, "meaning we are small, require very little paperwork and try to make people feel comfortable. In other words, we attempt to remove the sterile atmosphere of a regular medical clinic."

During its first week, staff diagnosed two clients with HIV. "We initiated rapid HIV treatment," recalled Ritchie, "and linked them to further care within 48 hours. Again, all for free."

PS...Test is located at the Las Palmas Medical Plaza in Palm Springs, California.Courtesy of PS...Test

The response from the community has been “heartwarming,” Ritchie said. “We are starting to get donations on PayPal from patients, and nonpatients, with notes saying how grateful they are we are here.”

Currently, Ritchie and her husband are funding the bulk of the clinic’s operations, she said, adding that PS...Test welcomes donations, which can be made on its website.

Palm Springs and the surrounding Riverside County in the Coachella Valley aren’t unique in seeing a spike in STI rates, a trend that only got worse during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many sexual health clinics shut down or pivoted to offer services related to the new coronavirus.

In a profile on PS...Test, the Desert Sun newspaper elaborated on the alarming STI trends in the state and nation:

> Riverside County rates per 100,000 residents for syphilis went from 4.6 in 2009 to 16.7 in 2019.... Gonorrhea rose from 698 per 100,000 residents in 2009 to 4,003 per 100,000 in 2019, while chlamydia rates jumped from 5,835 per 100,000 residents in 2009 to 12,303 per

> 100,000 in 2019....
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> Palm Springs alone has been a "hotspot" for syphilis infection since 2010.... The Palm Springs/North Palm Springs area had the highest [STI] incidence rate in the valley of 1,047.5 per 100,000 residents in 2015.
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> The COVID-19 pandemic didn't help lower rates. DAP Health saw a 30% and 15% increase in gonorrhea and syphilis infections, respectively, from January to June this year compared to those months in 2020, according to data from DAP Health. Additionally, HIV cases have increased 32% between July 2020 to June 2021 compared to July 2019 to June 2020.

PS...Test is open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday. For more informatio and to schedule an appointment, visit HealthyPSTest.org.

Last summer, DAP Health also began offering free STI testing and treatment.

In related news, a California law that went into effect January 1 aims at tackling STI rates. The law requires health insurance plans to cover at-home HIV and STI tests. The legislation also increases the number of providers that can offer the tests, allows the partners of patients to get tested and treated quickly and requires syphilis screening during the first and third trimester of pregnancy.

Non-California residents seeking at-home tests may be eligible for a free STI and HIV kit from TakeMeHome. To learn more about the STI epidemic, click the hashtag #Sexually Transmitted Infection to find a collection of POZ articles on the topic, including:

- "The Roaring Twenties Are in Full Swing,"
- "Good and Bad News About Global Rates of HIV, Viral Hepatitis and STIs,"
- "Insurers Must Cover PrEP and Related Services to Prevent HIV,"
- "$4.3M Will Help Integrate HIV Services in STI Clinics,"
- "Which U.S. Region Sees the Highest Rates of HIV Diagnoses and Deaths?" and
- "Sexually Transmitted Infections Reach Record High for 6th Year in a Row."

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