R.I.P. Dawn Smith, an HIV Prevention Advocate and CDC Researcher

Dawn Smith, MD, MPH, fought to expand PrEP and end HIV, notably among women and Black communities.

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The following post on HIV.gov was written by B. Kaye Hayes, MPA, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Infectious Disease, Director, Office of Infectious Disease and HIV/AIDS Policy (OIDP), Executive Director, Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS (PACHA).

The Office of Infectious Disease and HIV/AIDS Policy joins the rest of the HIV community in mourning the passing of Center for Disease Control and Prevention's Dr. Dawn Smith. Many of us in this office were fortunate to work with Dr. Smith. She was an insightful leader and a friend. Her career as an epidemiologist, medical officer, and researcher in CDC's Division of HIV Prevention (DHP) spanned decades and her myriad contributions to the field made a real difference in the lives of so many people.

Dr. Smith completed her residency at the Indian Health Service Hospital in Fort Defiance, Arizona. Subsequently, while earning dual master's degrees in public health and statistics from the University of Michigan in the late 1980s, she learned of a new and deadly disease that was killing African-American people at a disproportionate rate. This sparked her lifelong commitment to fighting HIV/AIDS. She began work at CDC in 1991. Her career there included four years serving as the associate director for HIV research at the CDC field station in Botswana where she helped develop clinical trial infrastructure and initiated PrEP trials.

For the last decade, she has been one of the nation's leading analysts of and advocates for expanding access to and use of PrEP among all those for whom it is indicated, including gay men of color and heterosexual men and women. Most recently, Dr. Smith served as the Biomedical Prevention Activity Lead in DHP. She was the lead author of the recently updated CDC Clinical Practice Guidelines for PrEP. Dr. Smith also served a leader of the Ending the HIV Epidemic in the U.S. initiative, managing DHP's EHE Prevent Pillar Workgroup, one of the four workgroups for each of the EHE pillars supporting the 57 prioritized jurisdictions to expand and strengthen their locally informed efforts to end new HIV transmissions.

At the time of her passing, Dr. Smith was detailed to leading the epidemiology task force in CDC's

multinational monkeypox response, where she applied her experience and expertise to another infectious disease of global concern.

I first had the pleasure of working with Dawn 31 years ago when I was also at CDC. We developed the first HIV Workplace Education Program for CDC employees. That was the beginning of a long relationship. I know that I am just one of many, many people in this field who benefitted from her advice and mentorship. She was wicked smart and a warrior for addressing HIV among women and disproportionately affected communities of color.

My colleagues Harold Phillips, director of the White House Office of National AIDS Policy, and Timothy Harrison, principal deputy director of OIDP, also shared their recollections of working with Dawn and her many contributions to the HIV community:

“During the February 2020 meeting of the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS (PACHA), Dr. Smith made an impression as a member of a panel of all women researchers who focused on the missed opportunities for HIV testing and access to PrEP for Black women,” recalled Mr. Phillips. “Packed full of insight and potential solutions, her remarks conveyed both her wisdom and passion. Because of that session, I made sure we explored the issues she raised in developing the revised National HIV/AIDS Strategy. Dawn mentored and inspired many of us in public health and as part of her legacy, it’s up to us to finish the tasks at hand.”

“Dawn was really at the forefront of working to eliminate HIV-related health disparities and ensure equity in our response to HIV,” remarked Dr. Harrison. “Over the past decade she was such an effective advocate for ensuring that the newest biomedical tools were reaching those who need them the most, especially communities of color and women.”

My OIDP team and I extend our sincere condolences to Dawn’s family, friends, and colleagues at CDC and throughout the HIV community. She will be greatly missed as a leader, mentor, and friend.

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