



In a Twist, Tennessee OKs \$9M in HIV Funding. But Is There a Catch?

Plus: The CDC will bypass Republican roadblocks and deliver federal HIV grants directly to a Nashville-based nonprofit.

April 21, 2023 By [Trent Straube](#)

UPDATE: Plot twist in the Tennessee HIV funding story. Mere hours after POZ filed the below story, [NBC News reported](#) that Tennessee lawmakers on Thursday approved \$9 million in the state budget for [HIV](#) efforts. This follows national outrage since Republican leadership announced in January that the state would reject up to \$10 million in federal funding from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#). As reported below, the CDC plans to bypass state roadblocks and deliver \$4 million directly to an HIV nonprofit for distribution.

While this latest development seems like a win for the HIV community, advocates say it's too soon to celebrate because it remains unknown where the state funding will be directed. A reason for concern is evident in a statement from Jade Byers, a spokesperson for the governor. According to NBC News, Byers said the HIV funds in the newly approved state budget will help Tennessee "provide better services and reach even more at-risk populations in the state, such as victims of human trafficking, mothers and children, and first responders."

That statement's a bit of a head-scratcher, considering that LGBTQ, African-American and Latino communities are most affected by HIV—but perhaps the bulk of new funding will indeed go toward these populations. We will update the story as more details emerge.

Below is the article posted earlier Friday, April 21.

The Tennessee Health Department kicked off 2023 by announcing it was rejecting as much as \$10 million in free federal funds to help fight [HIV](#). At the time, [Republican Governor Bill Lee explained](#), "It's important that [HIV funding is] spent effectively and efficiently, [and] we can do that better than the strings attached to the federal dollars that came our way, and that's why we made that decision." Advocates countered that the move was politically motivated, a way to attack [LGBTQ](#) groups and sexual health clinics such as [Planned Parenthood](#) that received some federal funding.

As that battle continues, a cavalry arrives in the form of the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#), the health agency responsible for dispersing federal HIV grants to Tennessee's Health Department. The CDC will now reroute the funding directly to the nonprofit United Way of Greater Nashville, which will then disperse the grants to HIV groups throughout the state, [reports Commercial Appeal](#).

The newspaper obtained a letter of intent from the CDC to send \$4 million to the nonprofit. Although the funding is less than half the amount originally allotted for the state, the paper described the CDC decision as "rare at a minimum, and possibly unprecedented."

Politicians and advocates applauded the move.

Congressman Steve Cohen is a Democrat who represents the 9th District, which includes Shelby County, the largest in the state and home to Memphis. "Governor Lee's decision to reject federal HIV epidemic funding is short-sighted and harmful," [Cohen said in a released statement](#). "Since the community partners learned that their access to funding was being eliminated, I have been in regular contact with them, the CDC, and Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra. I applaud the CDC for finding a solution to ensure that the people most at risk of contracting HIV will not lose access to important prevention services and those with HIV can receive adequate treatment. As Co-chair of the State Medicaid Expansion Caucus, I will continue to fight to improve access to affordable health care for those with HIV and all who live in Tennessee."

Toni Newman is the director of the Coalition for Justice and Equality Across Movements at NMAC, a national advocacy group that fights HIV through the lens of race. Newman and NMAC released the following statement:

"The CDC's decision...will preempt a public health crisis that has the potential to spread well beyond the borders of the Volunteer State.

"Lee is the first governor to ever reject the life-saving federal funding, a move that has nothing to do with cutting through bureaucratic red tape. In a clear assault on Tennessee's LGBTQ+ community, Lee knowingly and callously put the lives of thousands of Tennesseans in jeopardy for purely political gains.

"But that's what happens when elected officials take their cues from far-right media personalities like Tucker Carlson and Matt Walsh, who have made tens of millions of dollars by [monetizing fear](#). If Lee was actually concerned with the needs of Tennesseans, he would have worked to improve initiatives for HIV prevention and treatment. Instead, he weakened those initiatives when he rejected federal grants, claiming that using state dollars to address a non-existent HIV crisis that poses no substantial threat to Tennessee's first responders, mothers, and children was a more effective approach.

“Republicans are so focused on stripping rights away from the LGBTQ+ community to pad their ‘anti-woke’ resumes that they’re turning a blind eye to the ways their actions will harm the people they serve. As a Black trans woman who is directly impacted by these cruel policies, I applaud the Biden administration’s swift action on this issue and implore them to take proactive measures to prevent it from happening in other states.”

In related HIV news, see “[Tennessee Nonprofit Designated as an HIV/AIDS Center of Excellence.](#)”

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<http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/tennessee-hiv-groups-get-4m-federal-funds-despite-gop-roadblocks>