In Two Missouri Cities, HIV Advocates Focus on Reaching Women

In Kansas City and St. Louis, women—especially Black and transgender women—are disproportionately affected by HIV.

March 14, 2024 By Laura Schmidt

Women are often overlooked in conversations about HIV. In Kansas City, Missouri, where women account for about 18% of all HIV cases, locals are working to teach Black women about HIV prevention, testing and treatment, according to an article on KCUR.org, the local NPR channel.

Across the state in St. Louis, similar efforts focus on reaching women, reports FirstAlert4.com.

“Women in general, it’s been a little bit harder to change the mindset that hey, you also can get HIV,” said Juliana Castellanos, the HIV prevention director at Affinia Healthcare in St. Louis. She added that transgender women and young women between 13 and 24 years old are experiencing higher HIV rates.

Black women and girls account for about 54% of new HIV diagnoses among women in the United States, despite making up less than 15% of the nation’s female population. They are nearly 17 times more likely to contract HIV compared with white women, according to AIDSVu data. In Kansas City, Black women are more than nine times more likely to have HIV compared with white women, adds KCUR, based on Kansas City data from AIDSVu, which compiles data and interactive maps based on location and populations).

Nationwide, Black Americans account for about 14% of the population, but they make up 40% of new HIV diagnoses, according to AIDSVu. In Kansas City, about 43% of people living with HIV are Black. In St. Louis, about 61% of the HIV population is Black.

LaTrischa Miles, a treatment adherence manager at KC CARE Health Center in Kansas City who has been HIV positive for almost three decades, acknowledges that her daily treatment routine is not “one size fits all.”

“I take my medication in the morning, and I’m done,” Miles told NPR. “Everybody is not used to taking medications.”

Lack of education about HIV transmission as well as the persistence of stigma associated with HIV

in the Black community contribute to disproportionate HIV rates, according to Miles, who is cochair of the board of the Positive Women's Network–USA, a nationwide community of women living with HIV.

"People are in hiding or they're isolated, and that just keeps stigma going," said Miles. "You can't end stigma or combat it if you don't talk about it."

Misconceptions surrounding HIV and historical distrust in the health care system also contribute to increased HIV cases in the Black community.

Mary Keyes found out she was HIV positive 29 years ago. She was so shocked by her diagnosis that she accused her doctor of having the wrong test results. She told NPR that her reaction was a result of widespread misconceptions of HIV in the Black community.

"HIV didn't have anything to do with a Black female," Keyes said she thought at the time of her diagnosis. "It had everything to do with 'gay' [and] 'white.' So I said to her that it was incorrect."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 90% of new HIV diagnoses for Black women result from having sex with men, which is the highest proportion among all demographics.

Keyes, who experienced discrimination in the workplace because of her positive HIV status, said other women inspired her to stand up and use her voice to help others.

In related news, Sunday, March 10, was National Women and Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day (NWGHAAD) 2024. This year marked the 19th annual observation of NWGHAAD, the theme of which was "Prevention and Testing at Every Age. Care and Treatment at Every Stage." Events are scheduled throughout the month; search #NWGHAAD on social media for campaigns, webinars and more.

To read more on the topic, the POZ March 2024 issue highlights women. Feature articles include "Live to Tell," which explores how Madonna has been uplifting the HIV community since the early days of AIDS; "Centering the Voices of Women Living with HIV," in which Naina Khanna bids farewell to the Positive Women's Network–USA; and "A Work in Progress," a profile on Tatyana Lebed, who addresses the needs of women who use drugs in Ukraine. The issue also includes the Basics on HIV and Pregnancy, details about the HIV prevention vaginal ring approved for use in Africa and a post from The Well Project titled "Women Survivors."

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