Watch Advocates Fight HIV Crime Laws and Change Lives

Plus: These updated maps from CHLP (the Center for HIV Law and Policy) show the 32 states that criminalize HIV.

March 7, 2025 By Trent Straube

Laws unfairly criminalizing HIV have been on the books since the epidemic first emerged in the 1980s. Last week, advocates with CHLP (the Center for HIV Law and Policy) celebrated 20 years of fighting to end unjust HIV crime laws. To mark this milestone, the center hosted CHLP20, a celebration in New York City hosted by the Fund for the City of New York.



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Also last week, CHLP unveiled updated maps tracking HIV criminalization laws in the United States. The maps cover:

- Exposure and transmission offenses;
- Sex work penalty enhancements;
- Bodily fluid penalty enhancements;
- General criminal law penalty enhancements;
- Needle/syringe sharing penalty enhancements.

Enhancements refer to heightened criminal penalties for people living with HIV who are accused of violating, for example, a general criminal law or engaging in sex work. You can view all five criminalization maps at hivlawandpolicy.org.

One of five HIV criminalization maps updated in 2025 by CHLPCourtesy of hivlawandpolicy.org

The CHLP20 celebration included a 20th anniversary video in which advocates and collaborators share how CHLP has not only updated laws but also changed people lives. (Watch the video at the top of this article or on YouTube.)

Addressing the crowd, CHLP executive director S. Mandisa Moore-O'Neal discussed working with the staff to transition the organization to a Black feminist-led abolitionist organization, according to a CHLP press statement. "We changed the landscape of HIV justice. Folks are having to contend with abolition in a way that they never did," she said. "It's not just a T-shirt or a slogan. It is a legal strategy. It is a framework that determines how we talk to each other, how we draft bills."

The evening also honored CHLP founder Catherine Hanssens with the inaugural Urvashi Vaid Visionary Justice Award, named after the attorney, author and social justice movement strategist who fought for LGBTQ rights.

Special project consultant Matt Blinstrubas shared remarks from Jada Hicks, a senior attorney with CHLP's Positive Justice Project, that read in part:

"In 2025, we have doubled our reach and actively engaged in 20 state-based coalitions working alongside advocates, policymakers and people living with HIV in states across the country to dismantle laws that criminalize HIV based on stigma, not science. Over the years, we have built strong alliances with organizations and institutions that share our commitment to justice, equity and the fight against HIV criminalization. As we celebrate 20 years of CHLP, we also look forward—to building stronger partnerships, deepening our impact and continuing to fight until every law that criminalizes HIV is dismantled."

HIV criminalization refers to the use of unfair laws to target people who have HIV—notably, African-American, Latino and LGBTQ people and women—and to punish them because of their HIV status, not because of their actions. Under outdated laws, people with HIV can be sentenced to prison in cases where HIV was not transmitted and their only crime was allegedly not disclosing their status.

It should be noted that repealing HIV laws does not mean that people can't be held accountable for intentionally transmitting HIV. Other laws may apply to the situation.

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Many HIV laws were passed in the early days of the epidemic, when fear and lack of scientific knowledge about the virus reigned. Fast-forward four decades, and today we know, for instance, that people with HIV who take their meds and maintain an undetectable viral load do not transmit the virus sexually, a fact referred to as Undetectable Equals Untransmittable, or U=U.

For a roundup of related topics in POZ, click #Criminalization. You'll find headlines such as:

- "Positive Destinations: HIV Justice Network Rebrands HIV-Specific Travel Guide,"
- "Conservative Lawmaker Pushes to Repeal Ohio's HIV Criminalization Laws,"
- "People With HIV Have Been Arrested in Indiana for Donating Plasma,"
- "Black Men Make Up Almost Half of HIV Crime Cases in Mississippi" and
- "Nashville Agrees to Rewrite Policies Disqualifying HIV-Positive Police Candidates."

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