What Barriers to HIV Testing Do Transgender People Face?

Tori Copper offers answers and also talks about The TRANSitioning to Leadership Academy.

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Tori Cooper is an HIV Health Educator in metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia. Through Positive Impact Health Centers, a grantee of AIDS United's Transgender Leadership Initiative, Ms. Cooper and her colleagues created a leadership course for transgender individuals to increase participants' HIV knowledge and to improve HIV service delivery, health and social justice outcomes for their peers. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Human Services and is currently matriculating toward her Master of Arts in Public Health. Ms. Cooper has over 25 years of experience in the HIV field beginning as a volunteer during the beginning of the AIDS epidemic.

We were excited to connect with her to learn more about her work and motivations and to hear about the importance of National Transgender HIV Testing Day. Read our conversation below!

Tell me a bit about yourself and how you got involved in this work?

My name is Tori Cooper, and I am a Prevention Specialist at Positive Impact Health Centers in Atlanta, GA. I started as a "quiet advocate" volunteering for different organizations well over 25 years ago. When I relocated to Atlanta in 2009, I saw how transgender women and people living with HIV were being treated. My sisters were being misgendered, left out of care, and victimized by society and by the healthcare system. It is impossible to look at the intersection of Black transgender lives and flawed healthcare systems that routinely ignore our pleas for help and not see the negative impacts on our health and our lives.

What were you doing through your Transgender Leadership Initiative project? What were your overall goals and why was your program unique?

The TRANSitioning to Leadership Academy was created as a way to model and educate transgender women on how to become leaders in the trans and HIV communities. We created a 12-module course where participants learned a variety of ways to increase their leadership capacity. Some of the modules included Effective Communication, HIV 101, Advocacy Training, and other topics that are important to leaders.

What do you want people to know on this Transgender HIV Testing Day?

On April 18, National Transgender HIV Testing Day, and every other day of the year, we want the trans community and our allies, to understand the importance of HIV testing, treatment, and prevention. Knowing your status saves lives! For trans people living with HIV, treatment significantly reduces the risk of transmission. As a matter of fact, for a person living with HIV, taking your medicine daily and staying in care will help most people get to an undetectable viral load. Which means they cannot pass HIV along to their sexual partners. That is Treatment as Prevention (TasP)! For Trans people who do not have HIV, regular testing, correct and consistent condom use, and PrEP provide safeguards that will keep someone from getting HIV.

What are some of the barriers to testing and care that transgender people face in your community?

Some of the barriers to testing include the limited office hours at many testing sites. Other barriers include [the testing sites] not being culturally aware. For some people, especially trans people, they may not feel comfortable coming to “gay” offices or public health departments for testing. Being transgender is not the same as being gay. Trans people have historically been classified with MSM for funding and therefore missed out on much needed resources and data that’s specific

to our lives and health. All testing sites should be culturally appropriate in the décor, the location and most importantly, the staff. Some agencies should consider using a target marketing approach to testing. They should hire trans and GNC (Gender Non-Conforming) people to reach trans and GNC people. Hire Black and Brown people to reach Black and Brown people. Often, shared experiences lead to better outcomes. Do not tokenize employees or clients. And most importantly, treat everyone with dignity and respect.

Why is it important for people to talk about HIV? What are some ways to start the conversation?

Talking about HIV should be normalized. There is so much stigma associated with the topic. As a society, particularly in the South, many people still view HIV as something wrong. The flu is a virus, but we don't stigmatize people who get it. Herpes is a cousin to HIV, yet we don't even talk about it at all. Incidentally, herpes is even more easily acquired than HIV. Most people get HIV through sex. Many people already feel so ashamed of how they have sex and with whom they have sex, and we further stigmatize each other by feeling ashamed for having a sexually transmitted disease. It's ironic that we don't shame people who have Chlamydia the same way.

Can you speak to the importance of representation and organizations hiring transgender people?

As I mentioned before, transgender representation is important. Not only is it just the right thing to do, but it also seems to work well. People tend to be drawn to others that they view as being similar to themselves. I refer to it as speaking the same language. Agencies that serve trans people have a duty to hire and promote trans leadership.

How do you stay motivated in this work?

Motivation for me is measured in small successes as much as big successes. When a trans person, or anyone whom I work with, shares with me that they have reached viral suppression, that is a huge deal! That means they have just significantly improved their chances at living a longer and healthier life. That also means that they are doing their part to stop the spread of HIV. I sometimes spread myself thin because I have so many goals for my community. Education, healthcare, and gainful employment have helped me thrive in a society that doesn't always recognize my value as a trans person. So I do my best to empower, educate and provide opportunities for people like me. I would love to see my trans sisters and brothers working at every level of all different types of businesses. I use the treatment cascade as a way to measure the success of the people that I work with. If I can positively influence someone from diagnosis to viral suppression, then I have done my job. As long as there are new positives and people out of care, then I still have work to do.

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