How Can the U.S. Government Reduce HIV-Related Stigma?

The Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS (PACHA) explores way the federal government can address stigma.

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The Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS (PACHA) met this past week for the 60th time to provide recommendations regarding progress made and the future of our nation's response to the HIV epidemic, including effectively implementing the U.S. National HIV/AIDS Strategy (NHAS). After welcoming remarks from co-chair Nancy Mahon, Dr. Amy Lansky, director of the White House Office of National AIDS Policy, spoke, noting the strides that have been made toward achieving the 2020 NHAS goals, but also included the need for additional, more complex indicators to allow a better understanding of the current state of the HIV epidemic. Moving forward progress will be determined by new indicators based on the use of PrEP, reduction of HIV-related stigma, and measurements of HIV in the transgender community.

Much of the discussion focused on decreasing HIV-related stigma as an integral piece in the National HIV/AIDS Strategy with a report and recommendations from the PACHA Disparities Subcommittee Co-chairs on stigma reduction.

Fear of stigma deters people from getting tested, staying in treatment, and disclosing serostatus. Additionally, stigma that is internalized or acted upon by others can be a detriment to mental health and overall quality of life. How the public views diseases is a major fact in the development of stigma. In the 1980s, HIV was a new, unresearched, and undefined virus that often lead to death from opportunistic infections—all factors that increased the general public's willingness to stigmatize the disease. Presenters noted that we now live in an era where we can prevent transmission and treat individuals living with HIV so that a long, quality life is achieved. Yet, efforts to reduce HIV-related stigma have significantly lagged behind scientific advancements even though stigma remains a dangerous perpetuator of the virus.

Gabriel Maldonado and Scott Schoettes, co-chairs of PACHA's Disparities Subcommittee, spearheaded efforts to address HIV-related stigma by holding a summit where academics, researchers, clinicians, educators, advocates, federal partners, and community members living with HIV were invited to discuss proposals for specific activities that the federal government could implement to reduce HIV-related stigma and discrimination across the United States. After discussion, the initial set of recommendations from the Work Group was not adopted. PACHA

agreed to refine the recommendations based on the conversation at the meeting and then officially pass the recommendations at the next meeting. PACHA members are considering possible recommendations to create a framework for HIV-related stigma across Federal agencies and the wider HIV service community, find ways the federal government can eliminate HIV-related stigma and discrimination, and enhance the resiliency of people living with HIV.

With the implementation of tangible actions by the federal government, improvement in outcomes across the entire HIV care continuum could be seen. Presenters additionally noted that reducing stigma can transform the lives of people living with HIV by improving mental health and quality of life while also working towards NAHS's primary goals of reducing HIV incidence, increasing access to care, and eliminating HIV-related health disparities.

Also of note, this meeting marked Nancy Mahon's last meeting as PACHA's Chair, a position she has held for the past 5 years. AIDS United would like to thank and congratulate Ms. Mahon for her service, and wish her the best as she continues her dedication to ending the epidemic in her permanent role as Executive Director of the M A C AIDS Fund.

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