



In the HIV Field, We Call Them “Hard to Reach.” Maybe the Issue Is Us.

HIV outreach is about getting closer to the people we’re trying to reach, writes Avery McDougale of Positive Impact Health Centers.

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This “Voices of Community” AIDS United post is by Avery McDougale, Founder, Correct Strategies; Vice Chair, Board of Directors, Positive Impact Health Centers

I’ve watched the same people we call “hard to reach” show up, engage, and respond. Just not to us. That’s what made me start questioning the way we talk about this work, because the issue isn’t always access or awareness. Sometimes it’s whether what we’re putting out actually feels relevant when it shows up.

We spend a lot of time asking why things aren’t connecting. Why people aren’t getting tested, why they’re not staying in care, why the numbers aren’t moving. I’ve been in those rooms where we try to answer those questions. Strategy meetings, campaign planning sessions where everything looks right on paper. The messaging is clear, the visuals are strong, the budget is approved, and the timeline is set. Everyone leaves feeling like the work is solid.

Then the campaign launches, and the response is quiet. Not backlash, not confusion. Just silence. I remember one campaign in particular where we had done everything right. The messaging had been reviewed, approved, and refined. But when it reached the community, nothing moved. That kind of silence tells you something if you’re paying attention. It tells you the message didn’t miss by accident. It tells you it never really belonged there in the first place.

In this field, we use the phrase “hard to reach” a lot. I’ve used it too. But over time, working across campaigns and communities, I started to question it. Because the same people labeled “hard to reach” were engaged in other spaces. They were talking, sharing, showing up. Just not for us. That forced me to shift the question. Not how do we reach them, but where are we missing each other, and why doesn’t this feel relevant when it shows up?

Some of the most important lessons I’ve learned didn’t come from reports or dashboards. They came from conversations. From people who told us, directly or indirectly, that the message felt off. That it sounded like it came from the outside. That it asked for trust without showing any real understanding. Those moments don’t always make it into campaign summaries, but they should, because that’s where the real insight is.

There's another layer to this that doesn't get talked about enough. The longer we've been in this work, the easier it is to believe we already know what people need to hear. Clinicians, public health professionals, campaign leads. I've been in those rooms too. Experience matters, but it can also create blind spots if we're not careful. What worked five years ago, or even last year, does not always land the same way today. And when we rely too heavily on what we think we know, we stop noticing when the message no longer connects.

When we adjusted, things started to change. We slowed down, brought people into the process earlier, and tested ideas in real conversations instead of keeping everything internal. It wasn't perfect, and it wasn't immediate, but it was different. Engagement wasn't something we had to force. It started to happen, because the message felt familiar, relevant, and real.

We don't need more awareness campaigns. We need work that actually moves behavior. That takes more than better wording or bigger budgets. It takes a shift in how the work is built from the start. There are real pressures in this field, including funding timelines, reporting expectations, and the constant push to move quickly. I understand that. But we've also built systems that prioritize speed and output over connection and understanding, and then we act surprised when the work doesn't land.

The future of HIV outreach will not be defined by louder messaging. It will be defined by alignment between what we say and what people actually experience, between intention and execution, between strategy and reality. I'm still learning that in my own work, still adjusting and refining.

This is not about getting it perfect. It's about getting it closer. Closer to the people we're trying to serve, and closer to work that actually holds up when it leaves the room.

Be married to the goal, but date the process. Because if the process is off, the outcome will be too.

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