



Indian Health Services Launches the U=U Ambassador Program

Meet three Native people living with HIV (U=U Ambassadors) who share their stories and the message that Undetectable Equals Untransmittable.

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As our Native relatives pause to recognize National Native American HIV/AIDS Awareness Day on March 20 — the first day of Spring — the Indian Health Service, to reduce stigma toward Native people living with HIV, announces a new program called the “U=U Ambassador Program.” The Prevention Access Campaign launched the U=U campaign in early 2016 to advance public awareness and perception of HIV. U=U means that if someone has an undetectable viral load, they cannot sexually transmit HIV to others. U=U is supported by numerous health groups and organizations worldwide, including the IHS. To help increase awareness of this vital “treatment as prevention” campaign and realizing that HIV rates are still climbing in Indian Country, IHS is recruiting American Indian and Alaska Native people with HIV (U=U Ambassadors) to share their stories and the message to people with HIV who take their HIV medicine and have an undetectable viral load cannot transmit HIV.

The IHS U=U Ambassador Program seeks to disseminate correct information about HIV and U=U via online campaigns through the visibility of our Ambassadors. We are working to minimize stigma, create safer spaces within Indian Country for Native people living with HIV, and minimize barriers to care.

All Ambassadors will receive basic U=U science, communications and advocacy training. Working together, the U=U Ambassadors and IHS will educate and build the capacity of providers and communities to integrate the U=U message into sexual health communications, advocacy, and clinical practice.

Each Ambassador is responsible for three U=U-related social media posts a month while simultaneously working with IHS to advise providers on better ways to integrate U=U into clinical and other practices, create more awareness about U=U, and bring us closer to our global goal of ending the HIV epidemic.

What U=U Means to our first cohort of Ambassadors:

“My goal as a member of the IHS U=U Ambassador Program is to help create safer spaces and access to care for Indigenous relatives living with HIV through awareness, community education and working to eradicate stigma. From cedar to strawberries, Native folks like me are no strangers to sacred medicines. I don’t consider the HIV medicines that I take every night to control my HIV and remain undetectable any less holy than our traditional medicines. Remember, progress would be impossible if we always did things the way we’ve always done them. Change itself is also a medicine. It’s time we change our views on how we treat HIV, those of us who are THRIVING with it, and create a healthier culture in our communities where people living with HIV feel safe and supported.”

—Tony Enos

“I find it interesting that I tell everyone right away that I have Parkinson’s Disease, kind of like, I used to tell people that I have HIV/AIDS, at first greeting. ‘Hello, I’m Lisa Tiger, and I have AIDS.’ It was that simple for me in my youth. I have yet to mention it to my new jiu-jitsu friends. I have not told them I am HIV positive, and I even had AIDS when I let my CD4 count fall to 20 T-cells. Am I suddenly fearful of being judged after living with HIV/AIDS for 36 years? Thank Creator, for she has given me a new platform in U=U. It is now my responsibility to go out and educate others; they need not fear me and my AIDS because Undetectable means Untransmittable. Fear not!”

—Lisa Lou Ella Tiger

“Although I can’t remember when I was first told I was undetectable, I was told that there were only traces of HIV in my blood. This was the early 2000s. When going public on television, I was already consumed with issues relating to ignorance and stigma, so being undetectable didn’t weigh heavily on my mind. I knew I would always have HIV, and being undetectable helped me educate others about the impossibility of getting HIV from me. In my Apache community, stigma is still high, and education is lacking. Just telling people that HIV cannot be TRANSMITTED by someone undetectable is important. It’s important to keep it simple.”

—Isadore Boni

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