Meet Kelly Stevens, a Shero Behind the Scenes at AIDS United

The Getting to Zero program manager offers an easy step we can all take to start the HIV conversation and beat stigma.

March 8, 2019 By AIDS United

Kelly Stevens believes that few things are more important than one's health, and she is fully committed to working toward dismantling inequities in health outcomes and access to care. She has devoted much of her career to providing research and technical assistance to federal, state and local maternal and child health and comprehensive sexual health initiatives. We are lucky to have Kelly as a program manager for Getting to Zero, AIDS United's Capacity Building Assistance (CBA) initiative, where she helps organizations across the country improve their response to the HIV epidemic. She is especially interested in HIV workforce development, including leadership development and coaching, communication, and team cohesion.

This Sunday, March 10, marks National Women and Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day (NWGHAAD), so we want to highlight Kelly for all of the incredible behind the scenes work she does. She is truly an unsung shero in the field!

How did you get involved in the HIV field?

It actually happened by chance. By the time I graduated from college I had been working in prison and jail re-entry in Philadelphia for about 3 years part-time. It was such a meaningful and fulfilling experience for me that I was convinced that I had stumbled upon my career path in the best possible way. So, when things didn't come together like I had hoped I was completely lost. Not too long after that mini set back, I locked in an entry level job at a public health organization in Washington, DC. It was there that I learned pretty much everything that I know about public

health. I got to work on projects and initiatives that focused on maternal and child health, behavioral health, health equity, research and evaluation, viral hepatitis, and HIV.

Of all the projects I worked on, the work I did on HIV was by far the most meaningful and the most personal. HIV stigma was killing people. Lack of access to care was killing people. Silence was killing people. Black women who look like me, who could be me, were dying from a treatable disease, and it felt like the people couldn't bring themselves to talk about it. That's where my connection to this work and my passion for this work started, and I am still in it for the same reasons.

In your role, you have the unique opportunity to provide capacity building assistance to HIV organizations across the country. What has that experience been like?

I don't know that I have all of the words to describe just how rewarding it has been to be able to do this type of work professionally. I get to dive into addressing identified needs and supporting people in a way that I haven't been able to do since my re-entry work days. On a completely selfish level, I get so much out of being able to directly help people. Through this work, I get to contribute to service delivery strengthening that helps people in community get what they need to live well.

There is nothing vague about how what I do translates into people getting the service that they need, and that's a huge motivator for me. Specifically, I have been able to offer support to programs that have led to meaningful involvement of people living with HIV, strengthened syringe service efforts, diversified outreach and retention strategies, and encouraged the development of a culturally humble workforce. This work has been personally transformative in the most unexpected ways.

What have you learned from all of the people and organizations that you support?

The biggest lesson that I have learned is how to remain humble in this work. The importance of listening to learn and understand is essential to really meeting people where they are and helping them get to where they would like to go. It is not about me and what I think is best. It's about grounding myself in the context of the organization and the experiences within that system. It's about working with people to determine what is possible and what would be most meaningful. Every place is different with its own history and culture and struggles. Decisions about what would be most helpful should be made within that context, and that's what I try to always encourage. You don't know what you don't know until you ask, and my job is to remain unabashedly curious.

CDC.gov/Act Against AIDS

Switching gears slightly, on Women and Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day, what do you want people to know about HIV?

I want people to know that we all have a role in generating awareness. Just asking people in your life what they know about HIV and dispelling myths and misinformation is meaningful. You might be surprised what the ripple effect of a simple conversation can be. You don't have to work in the field to be knowledgeable. You don't have to be an expert or a doctor to have a conversation. We weaken the hold that stigma has on people and communities by normalizing the conversation. So let's get talking!

How do you stay motivated in this work?

Maybe it’s weird and not super healthy to be motivated by other people, but it is what it is. That’s what does it for me. The talented folks I get to work with both at AIDS United and in this field motivate me to learn more and do more. The people I get to meet who are at the front lines of this work motivate me to put my everything into what I offer and how I support them as a CBA provider. The people in community who are living with HIV motivate me, as a citizen of this world, to keep pushing against stigma, disparities, and social inequities in everything that I do and in all of the ways that I can use my voice.

Thank you Kelly for all that you do!

Are you working in the United States and would like to request CBA from Kelly and the AIDS United CBA team? Fill out our online request form and someone from the team will be in touch!

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