



When Silence Becomes HIV Stigma: The Cost of Misinformation in Our Communities

A lack of sexual health education has real-world consequences, writes MaKaila Eddings in this AIDS United “Voices of Community” blog.

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This “Voices of Community” AIDS United post is by MaKaila Eddings.

When we talk about sex education, it often looks well-rounded on paper. The curriculum lists lessons on anatomy, puberty, boundaries, consent, and even HIV, but in reality, it’s more of a brush-over than a real conversation.

Sex education isn’t just about “STD basics.” It’s about understanding, communication, and awareness that help communities grow healthier, safer, and more informed together. But when those conversations are missing, the gaps become generational.

If your parents, peers, or neighbors didn’t have access to these lessons, how could you ever learn what they were never taught? You can’t pass down what you were never given.

Being uneducated or uninformed isn’t shameful. It just means you haven’t been given the tools yet. The real issue begins when people remain uninformed by choice, when outdated terms, myths, and stigma are passed down instead of truth. Growth requires learning, unlearning, and a willingness to change how we talk about HIV and health as a whole.

Many students and community members still don’t know that U=U, that someone living with HIV who is on treatment cannot transmit the virus. This is scientifically proven and life-changing information that needs to reach every classroom, every young person, and every family.

This lack of education is not limited to one generation. My mother was born during the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and even had Magic Johnson speak at her high school. Yet, even as a teen mom, who should have been taught especially during that time, she continues to learn the facts about HIV and AIDS alongside me because she was never truly taught the science or realities of the virus. Knowledge gaps like these are universal, affecting teens, parents, and grandparents alike.

These gaps have real-life consequences. My great-aunt, who lived with HIV, was abused and ostracized by her partner and his children. She was even told she had to use separate silverware from everyone else. Experiences like hers demonstrate how misinformation, stigma, and fear persist across families and communities when education is lacking.

I remember my 9th grade year at Eastern Senior High School in Washington, DC, when we had optional HIV and STD testing. Afterward, instead of offering follow-up support or workshops, the results were summarized in unverified percentages, showing how many students from each grade tested positive. That information spread fast through word of mouth. Suddenly, people were whispering, judging, and making assumptions about their classmates.

That experience showed me how easily stigma can grow in silence. Silence doesn't just leave questions unanswered, it costs lives. Without accurate knowledge, youth may miss opportunities for prevention, delay testing or treatment, and carry shame that affects their mental health and relationships. Instead of helping students understand what HIV is, how treatment works, and that living with HIV is not a death sentence, it reinforced fear and misinformation. There were no counseling sessions, no discussions about prevention or community health, and no safe space for students to ask questions.

For young people whose minds are still developing, that kind of approach doesn't educate, it alienates. It teaches shame instead of empowerment. Washington, DC is full of resources, but those resources don't always reach classrooms or youth.

The gaps in sexual health education highlight broader inequities, youth of color, young women, and students in under-resourced schools are frequently excluded from critical conversations about HIV prevention, care, and stigma. HIV education should go beyond awareness, it should build empathy, health literacy, and confidence.

Another major gap is how healthcare providers approach prevention. Many young girls are introduced to birth control as early as age 13, often without being given the full context of their sexual health options. I was never told that you can access PrEP, a medication that prevents HIV, at the same age. I'll be 22 in December, and I only learned about PrEP this year, in 2025, while working with Advocates for Youth. That realization was eye-opening and frustrating. It showed me how information that could save lives is still being withheld or overlooked, especially for young people, women, and communities of color.

Breaking silence is not just about sharing facts, it's about sharing stories. Each story is a step toward ending stigma and showing that HIV doesn't define who we are. We need youth-centered programs that empower young people to lead conversations about HIV and sexual health, and ensure that knowledge is accurate, affirming, and culturally relevant. Schools should be spaces that don't just "warn" youth but truly prepare them, where we can talk honestly about identity, consent, pleasure, health, and stigma.

In a city as diverse and powerful as DC, and in communities across the country, we have the opportunity to lead by example. Real HIV advocacy starts when we challenge outdated systems

and start teaching in ways that empower instead of isolate. Education should never end with statistics, and it should always begin with compassion.

When young people are given the tools and space to ask questions, lead conversations, and share their voices, they become a living antidote to stigma. With the right resources, policies, and community engagement, we can ensure that not only DC youth but every young person grows up informed, empowered, and free from the stigma that has long shadowed HIV education. Ending the cost of silence requires all of us, educators, parents, policymakers, and community members, to ensure every young person across the country grows up informed, supported, and free from the fear that stigma breeds.

About the Author: MaKaila Eddings is a mentor at Washington Area Womens Foundation – GriotSisters. Makaila is college student passionate about and dedicated to making a positive impact through community service. My experiences in various initiative roles have deepened my understanding of social issues and strengthened my commitment to community empowerment

The “Voices of Community” blog is more than a platform, it is a promise. A promise that our stories, in all their complexity and truth, will shape the narrative of HIV advocacy. By telling our own stories, we ensure that the future of this movement is not written for us, but by us. The Voices of Community blog features reflections from across the HIV/AIDS sector. We welcome submissions rooted in lived experience, fresh ideas, and new perspectives. Contact sector@aidsunited.org to contribute.

[This blog post](#) was originally posted December 1, 2025, on [AIDSUnited.org](https://aidsunited.org).