

Local, State, and National Organizations Partner to Raise Awareness about Effective HIV Prevention

By Lindsay Marcus, Program Coordinator, AIDS Funding Collaborative

Educating, promoting, normalizing pre-exposure prophylaxis or PrEP is crucial to scaling up its implementation and in turn, impacting the rate of new HIV infections. That's why the AIDS Funding Collaborative is proud to announce a new public awareness campaign, in partnership with the Cleveland PrEP Working Group, City of Cleveland Department of Public Health, the Elton John AIDS Foundation, and Equitas Health, called *Let's Talk about PrEP*, featuring local PrEP users and advocates, aimed at educating the broad community, to promote PrEP among those who might be at risk for HIV, and to normalize HIV prevention.

Since 2012, anti-HIV drug, Truvada, has been approved by the FDA for use as PrEP to prevent HIV infection. Ask anyone who's tested positive for HIV since PrEP came on the market and they will tell you they wish they'd known about PrEP sooner.

If you haven't heard about PrEP yet, this is an HIV prevention strategy where individuals take a daily pill to ensure there is enough of the anti-HIV drug in their system upon exposure. CDC guidelines for PrEP include condom use, routine HIV and STI screening, and lab work to measure its impact on other body systems. For people at risk of contracting HIV, an incurable, chronic illness which, without consistent medical care, leads to death, a daily pill that essentially eliminates the risk of infection is a common sense solution.

With HIV rates that are nearly endemic in Cuyahoga County, our community needs to do more to get the word out about PrEP. Each year, the Greater Cleveland area experiences between 200-230 new HIV infections, accounting for about a quarter of new infections in Ohio. There are many ways to prevent HIV but messages of "don't have sex" and "always use condoms" are neither sufficient, nor realistic. The current HIV epidemic, both locally and nationally, is challenging our assumptions about risk and prevention. Here's what everyone should know about PrEP:

PrEP works and it's good for public health. When taken as prescribed, PrEP reduces the risk of HIV infection by 96-99% - better than typical condom use alone, 82-98%, according to the CDC. Because PrEP does not prevent pregnancy or other sexually transmitted infections, continued condom and contraception use is highly encouraged.

PrEP is accessible and affordable. PrEP is covered by most health insurance providers, including Medicaid, and a generic version was approved by the FDA in the beginning of June, 2017. Because removing any barrier to accessing PrEP is critical, there are professionals at most PrEP clinics who are experts at navigating the labyrinth of health care coverage and patient assistance programs, to assist individuals through the process of starting and paying for PrEP.

PrEP is harm reduction. Within a harm reduction framework, individuals with substantial risk of HIV exposure are offered tools and select what works for them, like PrEP, to reduce the risk of infection. PrEP is not for everyone and it's not forever – HIV risk changes over the course of a person's life and circumstances so they can decide when and for how long they use PrEP. Individuals interested in PrEP should work with a PrEP provider to determine if it's a good fit and to explore the myriad of circumstances that perpetuate their increased risk for HIV. For more information or to find a registered PrEP provider, visit www.OhioPrEP.org or call the PrEP hotline at (800)332-2437.

Lindsay Marcus is the Program Coordinator for the AIDS Funding Collaborative, a public/private funding partnership strengthening the community's response to HIV/AIDS by providing coordination, leadership, funding and advocacy in Cuyahoga County. The AIDS Funding Collaborative is housed at The Center for Community Solutions.