

i n F O C U S

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Project Inform Helps to Lead San Francisco's Effort to Get to Zero

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The United States is making significant progress nationally in strengthening the health outcomes of people living with HIV and AIDS and reducing new cases of HIV infection. Much of that progress has to do with the strength of the arsenal of HIV medications that exists today; a substantial and sustained investment in care, treatment and prevention programs; and a sharper focus on evidence-based approaches to treatment and prevention brought about through the adoption of the National HIV/AIDS Strategy in 2010. Project Inform worked closely with the Obama administration in 2009 and 2010 to develop the Strategy, and our programs and services are designed to support implementation of this blueprint for ending the epidemic.

Progress against the epidemic has caused jurisdictions, including the States of New York and Washington and the City of San Francisco, to consider whether it is now possible for them to further accelerate progress and virtually, if not entirely, end their local epidemics. All three jurisdictions have developed broad-based coalitions to adopt and implement plans that move from the strong base of what has already been done to achieve progress against HIV to ending it. San Francisco's plan is called Getting to Zero, and its goals are to achieve zero HIV related deaths, zero new infections, and zero HIV related stigma by 2025. More immediately, Getting to Zero seeks to reduce HIV deaths and infections by 90% by 2020.

Starting in 2010, San Francisco accelerated its gains against HIV through three major initiatives. One was a relentless focus on encouraging increased testing, which continues today at very high levels. A second was the adoption of a policy to offer HIV treatment to every diagnosed person. This was a bold move in 2010, because research had not yet firmly established that immediate treatment was in the long term interest of a

patient—definitive proof of that fact came in 2013. But Project Inform actively supported the city's early treatment approach given substantial data suggesting that such a policy could contribute to improvements in the health outcomes of HIV-positive individuals, and prevent new infections.

These are the four Getting to Zero Initiatives:

RAPID

RAPID is a program that works to start a newly diagnosed person with HIV in medical care and treatment on the same day that they are diagnosed, if at all possible. A team of individuals works with the patient to do whatever is necessary—identifying a care provider, providing transportation, sorting out insurance related problems, or providing a starter-pack of free medications to immediately initiate treatment. Particular focus is placed on people in the earliest and most acute stages of infection when high levels of virus—and therefore the opportunity for transmission of HIV to others—is highest. Initially implemented in only three city operated clinics, the goal is to implement RAPID citywide in all public and private settings seeking this form of assistance. RAPID has been shown to reduce the average time it takes for HIV-positive people to achieve viral suppression from 4.2 months to 1.9.

RETENTION AND RE-ENGAGEMENT:

This initiative is working to address the fact that a significant percentage of HIV-positive people initially linked to care and treatment fall out of care over time. It seeks to implement services that support people to remain in care and treatment over time, re-engage people lost to care and treatment, support adherence to taking medications, and achieve all important viral suppression. Initially, this involves developing a citywide standard

of care in which all people with HIV engaged in medical care receive medical appointment reminders, follow-up for missed visits, and linkage to intensive navigation services and case management. In the first three months of operation, 110 people have been re-linked to medical care by a staff of health system navigators. This initiative also involves using the city's database of HIV-positive individuals to identify patients out of care and have navigators support their return to care and treatment. Many people with the greatest difficulty being retained in care and treatment are in significant need of housing, mental health or substance abuse treatment services, and this initiative seeks to increase the supply of those services.

PrEP:

The third initiative seeks to significantly increase PrEP use, with a focus on assuring that populations that could most benefit from it, including young gay and bisexual men of color and women of color, are linked to and retained in PrEP services. The work of this committee currently focuses on assuring that PrEP services are available citywide, and that clinicians are trained in how to deliver it. A particular focus is on assuring that individuals being seen for STDs are approached to consider PrEP uptake, and that HIV test counselors are discussing PrEP with individuals testing negative for HIV who might benefit from it. This initiative will also involve a program of PrEP Ambassadors who use word of mouth to educate and link people to services, if they so choose.

ENDING STIGMA:

Continued high levels of stigma around having HIV, and even around PrEP use, are proven to discourage people from being tested and seeking appropriate medical care for HIV. Stigma also presents a significant emotional burden for many HIV-positive people. Stigma is still experienced in society as a whole, in encounters with some health care providers, and within communities most affected by HIV. Efforts to reduce and eventually eliminate HIV stigma are likely to improve the health and well-being of HIV-positive people, and perhaps increase the use of PrEP. The Stigma Committee of Getting to Zero plans to launch a research project to better characterize this issue in San Francisco, and using the data it gathers, design interventions to address the problem.

Getting to Zero enjoys strong support from SF Mayor Ed Lee, the Board of Supervisors and the Director of the DPH, Barbara Garcia. In its first year, the effort secured \$1.3 million in City funds, and Project Inform helped to secure a generous grant of \$500,000 from the MAC AIDS Fund. It appears that the City may invest an additional \$3 million in Getting to Zero in the coming budget year. These funds do not support urgently needed expansions of housing, mental health and substance use services, however.

Project Inform is currently helping to lead an effort to develop a Getting to Zero plan in California, and we will keep our readers informed about developments on both of these initiatives.

We love you! So, Save This Date!! Donor and Volunteer Appreciation Event

Wednesday, May 4, 2016 6PM - 8PM | Tank18, 1345 Howard Street, San Francisco

Project Inform is hosting a Donor and Volunteer Appreciation event to honor and celebrate the amazing support and service of our funders and volunteers.

Project Inform is deeply humbled by the dedication and generosity of our donors and volunteers. We would not be here were it not for the thoughtful and loyal support of thousands of individual, corporate, foundation and in-kind givers. And we could not have delivered 30 years of lifesaving services to people with HIV and hepatitis C without the hard work of countless volunteers who have given so freely of their precious time. Please join us on May 4 so that we may thank you personally for all you have done to create a better world. No contribution is requested or needed - just your presence so that we can show our deep appreciation.

You can RSVP by going to projectinform.org

We hope to see you there!

For more information regarding this event please contact Henry Lucero, Deputy Executive Director for Development at (415) 558-8669 Ext. 216 or hlucero@projectinform.org