

Why Are We Still Talking About AIDS?

By John Barry, LMSW, Executive Director, STAP

I was recently asked why the Southern Tier AIDS Program still exists. I do admire the person's candor. If this person said it, other people are thinking it. The inquiry was grounded I suppose, in a belief that AIDS is a problem we have solved. The short answer is that we are still needed. STAP's supportive services for those living with HIV/AIDS are critical to keeping folks healthy. Did you know that HIV+ persons with a low viral load cannot transmit HIV sexually? We help accomplish that. Prevention is more important than ever as we attempt to "reach the end of AIDS" here in New York State. Did you know that people can take a pill once a day to prevent HIV transmission if they believe that they are at risk? We help accomplish that. Our testing programs have expanded to include not just HIV, but Hepatitis C and sexually transmitted diseases. STDs are at an historic high nationwide and rising. We test people and get them into treatment.

The long answer is...well, more complex. Healthcare policy and practice is shifting to recognize the critical role that poverty, race, gender and sexual orientation play in health. This is nothing new to us. In fact, it is the reason this organization exists. AIDS was difficult to treat when it emerged, but it was not only the lack of medical technology that complicated its treatment. The medical system (and the larger culture) struggled with responding compassionately to those groups most heavily impacted by AIDS: gay men, injection drug users and communities of color. Stigma and discrimination resulted in poor quality of care and advocacy by those outside the systems of care was required to correct it.

The increased use of opiates/heroin and the concomitant increase in overdose deaths has laid bare the weak places in our systems of care for substance users. New approaches are required. Harm Reduction interventions such as syringe exchange, naloxone distribution, suboxone prescribing, onsite health care for drug users at syringe exchanges, drug testing and overdose prevention centers have helped to keep people alive, assist them with entering treatment and prevent communicable diseases. It should be noted that all these approaches help people recover, preserve public dollars and can be found at STAP.

In the last decade STAP has quietly grown beyond its roots as an AIDS service organization. We now offer a food pantry, housing, care coordination, LGBT youth services, prison/jail reentry services, Hepatitis C services, STD testing, medical services and substance use treatment. Being HIV+ is not required to access any of these services.

The lessons that AIDS taught us have made us an invaluable public health tool and there will always be a need for that.