



RED RIBBON TIMES

2025 Volume 16



From Stigma to Strength: My Journey of Empowerment

By Sueanne Vazquez

Living with a chronic condition for over 30 years has been an extraordinary journey filled with challenges, personal growth, and empowerment. When I first received my diagnosis, it felt as though my world was collapsing. The burden of stigma, both from society and within myself, was overwhelming. Yet, over time, I discovered a sense of purpose, positivity, and the resilience to move forward.

Taking a daily medication has become a vital part of my journey. While it may seem simple, it symbolizes my commitment to self-care and determination. I have learned to stay focused and avoid distractions that could lead me astray.

A significant turning point in my life was the partnership I formed with SmartCare Pharmacy. What began with a casual conversation about medication evolved into a powerful collaboration, empowering not only me but also countless others. For three

years, this partnership has been a cornerstone of my advocacy efforts. I am now excited to transition to Adya Care, where I will focus on empowering senior citizens, sharing their stories, and working to reduce stigma within their communities. Nevertheless, my dedication to supporting others in similar situations remains strong, and I will continue to actively engage with the community of people living with chronic conditions, which will always be my priority.

In the early years following my diagnosis, I faced profound struggles, battling suicidal thoughts and attempting to take my life multiple times. Each of those attempts failed, ultimately revealing to me that my life had already been charted for a greater purpose. I learned to quiet my mind and listen to the guidance I received. This realization marked a turning point, showing me my life was meant for something more significant.

continues on next page...

In this issue...

1-2 From Stigma to Strength

3 Puerto Rican Day Parade & Festival

5 Pedaling with Purpose



6-8 National HIV Testing Day Activities

5 Empowerment Through Storytelling

9 Puzzle of Strength and Unity

10 Routine Screening and Linkage To Care

CENTRAL FLORIDA HIV PLANNING COUNCIL

STANDING COMMITTEES

Membership & Engagement Committee

- This meeting is the first Tuesday of the month at 2:00 PM

Service Systems Planning & Quality (SSPQ) Committee

- This meeting is on the first Thursday of the month at 9:30 AM.

Executive Committee

- This meeting is the Thursday of the week before the Planning Council meeting at 2:00 PM

Planning Council Business

- This meeting is the last Wednesday of the month
- Meet-N-Greet (5:30 PM) & Meeting (6:00 PM)

Ryan White Community Meeting

- This meeting is on the third Tuesday of the month at 6:00 PM. Dinner will be served and transportation available for RWHP clients.

PLANNING COUNCIL SUPPORT CONTACT INFORMATION

Whitney Marshall PCS Manager

407-429-2216
Whitney.Marshall@hfuw.org

David Bent PCS Coordinator

407-429-2119
David.Bent@hfuw.org

Laura Perez PCS Specialist

407-835-0906
Laura.Perez@hfuw.org

RYAN WHITE PART A SERVICE PROVIDERS

AIDS Healthcare Foundation
407-204-7000
www.aidshealth.org

ASPIRE Health Partners
407-245-0014
www.aspirehealthpartners.com

Center for Multicultural Wellness and Prevention
407-648-9440 • www.cmwp.org

Dept. of Health in Lake County
352-771-5500
http://lake.floridahealth.gov/

Dept. of Health in Orange County
407-858-1437
http://orange.floridahealth.gov/

Dept. of Health in Osceola County
407-343-2030
http://osceola.floridahealth.gov/

Dept. of Health in Seminole County
407-665-3200
http://seminole.floridahealth.gov/

Heart of Florida United Way
407-835-0900 • www.hfuw.org

Hope and Help Center
407-645-2577
www.hopeandhelp.org

Miracle of Love
407-843-1760
www.miracleofloveinc.org

Orange County Medical Clinic Pharmacy
407-836-7160

Midway Specialty Care Center
407-745-1171 • midwaycare.org

Part A Recipient's Office
2002-A E. Michigan Street
Orlando, FL 32805
407-836-7631



Connect with us on Facebook @
CentralFloridaHIVPlanningCouncil

Connect with us on Instagram @cfhpc

http://centralfloridahivpc.com
http://orangecountyfl.hiv

As a member of the Ryan White Planning Council, I have seen the power of advocacy firsthand. This council welcomes everyone, regardless of their background or circumstances, emphasizing that every voice matters. I encourage others to join and make their voices heard in building a supportive and inclusive community.



Community has been my lifeline throughout this journey. Organizations such as Aspire Partners, Adya Care Foundation, QLatinx, SomosLoud, Abrigado Corazones, and Alegría—especially through initiatives like “La Caravana de la Alegría,” founded by Papa Jaime, which provided support to 100 seniors and an additional 50 unhoused individuals during the holidays—have been invaluable. Their support serves as a reminder that no one walks this path alone.

On a personal note, I have been fortunate to share a loving relationship for 25 years with someone who does not share my condition. Our bond showcases the power of love and understanding, demonstrating that one's condition does not determine the capacity for deep, meaningful connections.

MY MESSAGE IS SIMPLE: DON'T WAIT DECADES TO FIND YOUR PURPOSE. TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR HEALTH, STAY FOCUSED, AND EMBRACE YOUR JOURNEY NOW. Life is a precious gift, and each of us has the ability to shine despite the challenges we face.

Each day, I encourage you to wake up and declare, “I am!” followed by a positive affirmation. Let this mantra set a powerful tone for your day and empower you to confront the world with confidence.

This is my story, and I hope it inspires others to find strength in theirs.

I will also be sharing photos from my 2024 journey, filled with hopes and plans for 2025. Let these moments serve as a testament to a remarkable year gone by and the exciting projects that lie ahead.

Happy New Year! Wishing you a Happy You, a Happy Life, and a Happy Self!

**Planning Council Support
Heart of Florida United Way
1940 Cannery Way
Orlando, FL 32804
407-835-0906**

CFHPC@hfuw.org

**“Drop Us
a Line...”**

Puerto Rican Day Parade & Festival

By Kara Johnson Williams

The Area 7 Program office proudly participated for the third consecutive year in the vibrant Puerto Rican Day Parade and Festival, an event celebrating the rich culture and contributions of the Puerto Rican and broader Latino communities. This year's participation was a powerful collaboration among the Talk Test Treat Latinos HIV Stigma Taskforce which makes up six partner agencies: Bliss Healthcare, Positive Assistance, QLatinx, Hope and Help, Aspire Health and Agulair Salud.

In addition, we partnered with our internal colleagues from Facilities who assisted with set up and PrEP Program, who provided on-site PrEP education. Together, we created a welcoming space dedicated to promoting HIV prevention, offering on-site HIV testing, delivering PrEP education, and connecting

individuals directly to care. Through this collaboration, we engaged with 350 of community members and tested 48 individuals. Through our outreach we provided culturally relevant education, answering questions about sexual health, and connecting individuals with vital resources. Our survey data indicated only 35% of individuals engaged were aware PrEP and 28% of individuals engaged have never tested for HIV and 39% tested over one year.

Our continued presence at the Puerto Rican Day Parade and Festival underscores our commitment to meeting the Latin community where they are—bringing health services directly into spaces of celebration, pride, and unity. We are honored to work alongside trusted partners to foster a healthier, stronger community,



Help Shape HIV Prevention for College Women in Orlando!



HIV transmission among college women in the Orlando area is a public health concern. Pre-exposure prophylaxis or PrEP is an effective method of preventing HIV, but few college women are taking it. To increase awareness about PrEP for HIV prevention, this research will adapt and pilot test a PrEP Ambassador training program for college women. The training program will prepare college women to share accurate information about HIV and PrEP with their peers.



You are being invited to take part in a research study to adapt the training program to ensure that it meets the needs of college women in the Orlando area.

To participate, you must be:

- at least 18 years of age
- a cisgender woman (assigned female at birth and identify as a woman)
- enrolled part-time or full-time in a 2-year or 4-year college in the Orlando area

What you will be asked to do:

- Participate in a group meeting that will include demonstrations of the training materials
- Participate in a focus group discussion
- Complete an online survey about the training materials

Additional information

- Time requirement: 2 hours
- Incentive for participation: \$50
- Your responses will be kept confidential
- The focus group discussion will be audio recorded and transcribed, but your personal identifiable information will be kept separate in a password-protected file.



SCAN TO SIGN UP

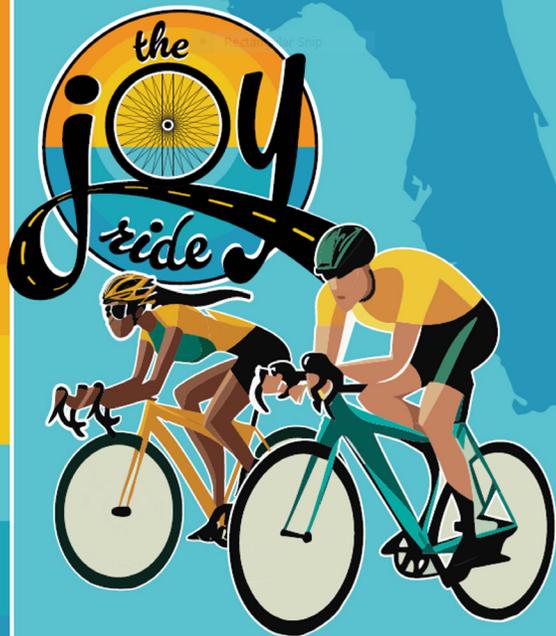
Questions?

Dr. Richelle Joe
jacqueline.joe@ucf.edu



UNIVERSITY OF
CENTRAL FLORIDA





Orlando to Tampa
November 21-22 2025
a 2 day, 165 mile ride.

Pedaling with Purpose: Why Now Is the Time to Join The Joy Ride

By Angus Bradshaw

For over two decades, the SMART Ride carried thousands of passionate cyclists into Key West, raising millions for HIV/AIDS service organizations across Florida. While that chapter may have closed, a bold new journey has begun—The Joy Ride—and this year, it's hitting the road from Orlando to Tampa, with a renewed mission, an urgent call to action, and a whole lot of heart.

In the face of looming federal funding cuts to HIV/AIDS programs, the services many depend on for housing, medical care, prevention, and emotional support are at risk. Now is the time to act—and ride—with purpose.

The Joy Ride is unique: 100% of the funds raised are split directly between five Florida-based, community-driven organizations: Miracle of Love, Inc., Pridelines, Compass, Empath Partners in Care (EPIC), and Broward House. That means every dollar goes straight back to providing direct client services—no overhead, no waste. And for those riding or donating on behalf of Miracle of Love, those funds stay right here in Central Florida, supporting individuals and families in our own backyard.

This ride is more than miles—it's a movement. As the political climate grows more hostile toward marginalized communities, especially LGBTQ+ individuals and people living with HIV, your participation becomes an act of resistance, solidarity, and love.

Whether you're riding, donating, or cheering from the sidelines, you're helping to protect and uplift lives. Join us on this meaningful journey from Orlando to Tampa and be part of something bigger than yourself.

Ride for love. Ride for community. Ride for joy.



Empowerment Through Storytelling: A Message to Our Community

by Sueanne Vazquez

Living with HIV is a journey marked by resilience, strength, and the unwavering hope for a brighter future. Sharing our personal stories helps break down stigma, encourages others to stay strong, and reminds us that we are never alone in this experience. Your story is powerful. It is a source of inspiration and a beacon of hope to others living with HIV.

This month, we invite you to reflect on your own journey and fill in the blanks to share your experience with the community. By doing so, you can help empower someone else who may be facing similar challenges. Your voice matters.

Fill in the blanks below and share your story:

- 1. The moment I first found out about my HIV diagnosis, I felt:** [Your feelings at the time of diagnosis, e.g., fear, confusion, relief]
- 2. What helped me cope in the beginning was:**
[This could be a person, a support group, therapy, medication, etc.]
- 3. A turning point in my journey with HIV was when I realized:** [Describe a moment of realization that helped change your outlook or attitude toward your diagnosis.]
- 4. One thing I want others living with HIV to know is:**
[A piece of advice or encouragement you would offer to others in the community.]
- 5. Today, I find strength in:**
[Describe something that helps you feel empowered and strong today, whether it's a routine, a person, or a cause.]
- 6. What gives me hope for the future is:**
[Your thoughts on hope and the future, such as advancements in treatment, advocacy work, or community.]

By sharing your story, you can inspire others and help create a more supportive, understanding world for all of us. Remember, you are not alone in your journey, and your voice makes a difference.

If you're currently struggling or need someone to talk to, please don't hesitate to reach out to our support hotline at [insert resource number]. We're here to listen and offer support.

Send your completed reflections to [email address] or share them at our upcoming RW Community meeting. Together, we can create a powerful message of hope and strength for the entire HIV-positive community.



NATIONAL **HIV** TESTING DAY ACTIVITIES

Talk Test Treat Central Florida

On June 27, 2025, Central Florida stood committed in the fight against HIV as the Area 7 Program Office, AdventHealth, and a coalition of more than 15 community agencies came together to observe National HIV Testing Day (NHTD)—a nationwide day of action dedicated to promoting HIV testing, reducing stigma, and expanding access to care.

This year’s theme, “Level Up Your Self-Love: Check Your Status,” resonated across the region through a coordinated blend of clinical innovation and grassroots outreach. Public health leaders and healthcare providers mobilized in Orange, Osceola, Seminole, and Brevard counties, offering free HIV testing, education, and prevention resources in both community and clinical settings.



Advent Health’s Leadership Through Routine Screening

As part of this year’s observance, Advent Health highlighted its growing commitment to HIV prevention through its adoption of the FOCUS model (Front lines of Communities in the United States), developed by Gilead Sciences. Since implementing the model on March 26, 2025, Advent Health has conducted over 10,000 HIV tests and identified 44 individuals living with HIV, all of whom were immediately connected to care.

Routine HIV screening is currently active at the Downtown Princeton Emergency Room, with expansion planned to additional Advent Health campuses in the coming months. The next phase of the initiative will also include syphilis and hepatitis C testing, reinforcing Advent Health’s comprehensive approach to infectious disease prevention.

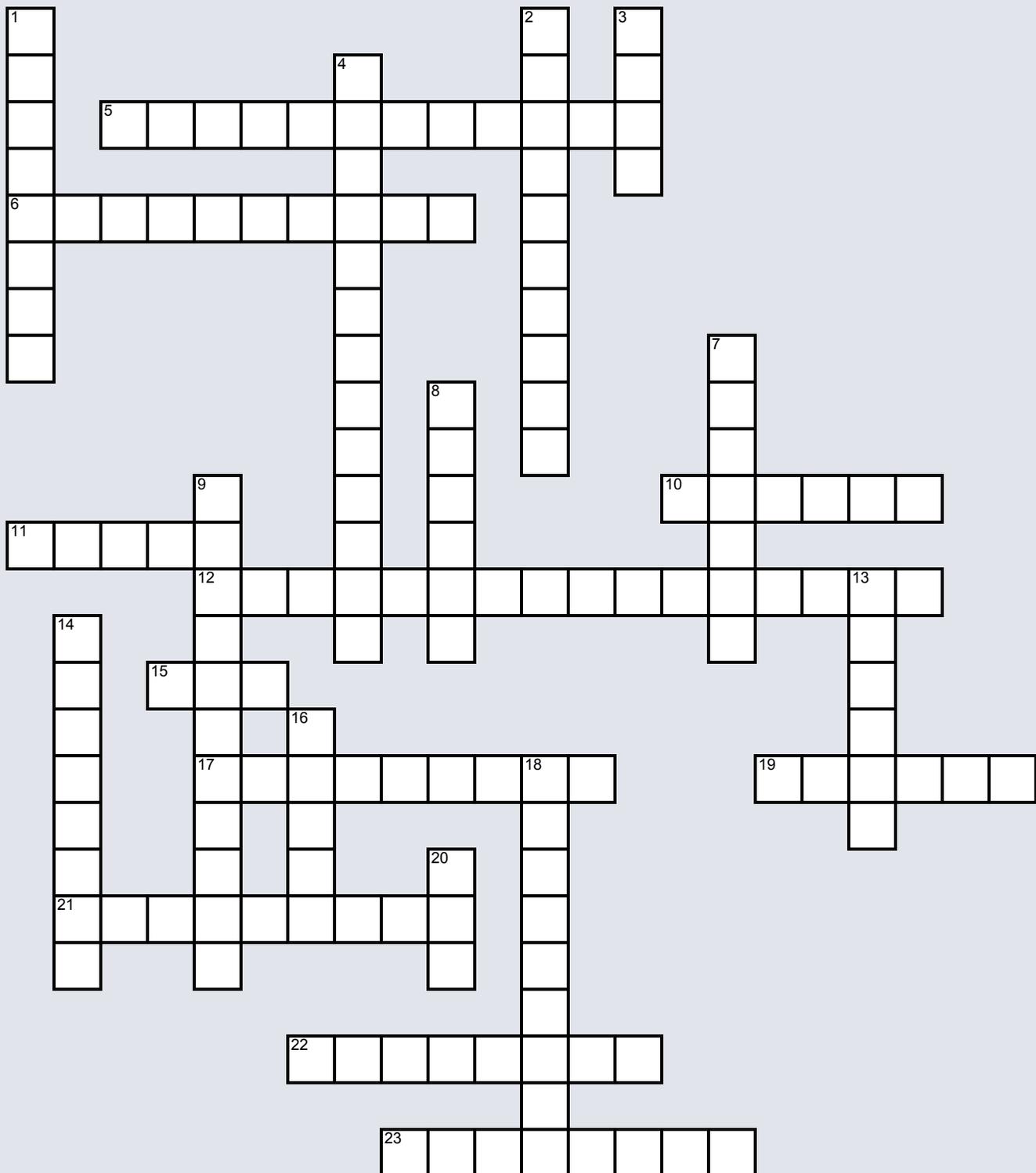
Beyond clinical settings, the Area 7 Program Office and its network of 15 community partners collaborated with Walgreens to provide on-site HIV testing across all four counties. Participating Walgreens locations served as trusted and accessible spaces for individuals to receive free, confidential testing along with prevention resources and educational materials.

These community-based events ensured that testing was not only available—but approachable. From neighborhood storefronts to health resource tables, the effort aimed to meet individuals where they are, especially in communities that experience the highest HIV burden.



Puzzle of Strength and Unity

RED RIBBON TIMES CROSSWORD CREATED BY: Sueanne Vazquez



Across: 5 Celebrated milestone for health | 6 Common test for HIV management | 10 Symbol of resilience and growth | 11 Celebration of diversity | 12 Advisory group for HIV services | 15 Virus targeted by antiretrovirals | 17 Daily health routine | 19 Step in transmission prevention | 21 Emotional state when supported | 22 HIV prevention campaign undetectable | 23 Partner during treatment | **Down:** | 1 Advocate for awareness | 2 Region with highest HIV rates | 3 HIV prevention method | 4 Partner who does not have HIV | 7 Common side effect of some meds | 8 Center for PLWH support | 9 Virus' method of reproduction | 13 Essential bodily defense system | 14 Month of world Aids Day | 16 Feeling of stigma often overcome | 18 Professional offering support | 20 Strong immune cell often monitored

ROUTINE SCREENING AND LINKAGE TO CARE FOR HIV, HCV, STIs AND OPIOID MISUSE SAVES LIVES AND MONEY

Too many cases of HIV, hepatitis C (HCV), and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) go undiagnosed, delaying care and risking accidental transmission. Routine screening saves money because early care and prevention costs less and reduces future cases.



Why Hospitals

Emergency Departments (EDs) are a strategic access point for routine HIV, HCV and STI screening as many people who are at greatest risk turn to EDs for care. Routine screening in EDs is cost-effective.¹



Emergency Departments serve approximately 140 million people each year and are a critical source of care for many vulnerable populations, including racial and ethnic minorities.²

HIV Costs Avoided

7 in 10 people with HIV saw a provider prior to diagnosis and failed to be diagnosed.³



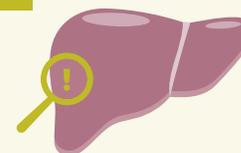
Nearly 40% of new HIV infections are transmitted by people who are unaware of their HIV status.⁴



Early detection and prevention of HIV can **save more than \$330,000** per person.⁵

Hepatitis C (HCV) Costs Avoided

Untreated HCV is the leading cause of liver cancer and liver failure, but because there is not enough screening, **40-50% of people living with HCV do not know they have it.**⁶



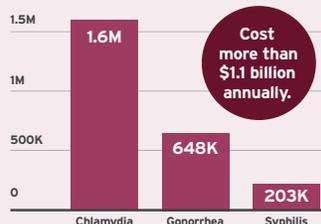
Treatment for HCV is highly effective, and most people can be **cured in as little as 8 weeks.**⁷



Investing in HCV treatment comes at a cost of about \$19,000; but not treating HCV can result in lifetime costs more than \$200,000, **saving more than \$181,000.**⁸

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) Costs Avoided

In 2022, over **1.6 million cases of chlamydia, 648,000 cases of gonorrhea, and 203,000 cases of syphilis** were reported in the U.S. and are estimated to cost more than **\$1.1 billion annually** in direct medical costs, despite being preventable infections.⁹



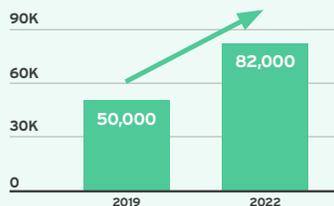
The number of syphilis cases has increased 80%, and **congenital syphilis has increased 138%** in the past 5 years.¹⁰ The best way to prevent congenital syphilis is with increased testing and treatment for pregnant women.



Infant hospitalizations for congenital syphilis-related reasons cost 4.5 times more than infant hospitalizations for other reasons¹¹ – But treating syphilis during pregnancy costs as little as \$15, **effectively preventing congenital syphilis altogether.**¹²

Opioid Related Costs Avoided

One study found that half of overdose deaths occurred **within three months** of an emergency department visit.¹³



Overdose deaths have skyrocketed in the last decade; **Opioid-involved overdose deaths rose from 50,000 in 2019 to 82,000 in 2022.**¹⁴

Injection drug use increases a person's risk of HIV, HCV, and other infectious diseases; 1 in 10 HIV diagnoses are among people who inject drugs, and injection drug use is the number one risk factor for HCV transmission.¹⁵



¹ Torres, G., et al. HIV Screening Programs in US Emergency Departments: a cross-site comparison of structure, process, and outcomes. *Annals of Emergency Medicine*. July 2011.

² Cairns, C., et al. Emergency Department Visit Rates by Selected Characteristics: United States, 2021. *National Center for Health Statistics Data Brief*, CDC, August 2023.

³ CDC Vital Signs: Human Immunodeficiency Virus Testing and Diagnosis Delays-United States. *MMWR*. December 1, 2017.

⁴ CDC, HIV Public Health Partners. HIV Testing

⁵ Schackman, et al. The Lifetime Medical Cost Savings from Preventing HIV in the United States, *Med Care*, April 2015.

⁶ American Liver Foundation. Hepatitis.

⁷ CDC, Treatment of Hepatitis C, December 2023.

⁸ The AIDS Institute, Fact Sheet: Treating Hepatitis C Saves Lives and Money. August 2021.

⁹ CDC, STIs, Sexually Transmitted Infections Prevalence, Incidence, and Cost Estimates in the US, April 3, 2024.

¹⁰ Centers for Disease Control, Sexually Transmitted Infections, The State of STIs in the United States in 2022.

¹¹ Kishore Umapathi, K., Cost of congenital syphilis hospitalizations skyrockets with increase in cases, *Healio*, September 17, 2019.

¹² Dunleavy, B., *Everyday Health* Syphilis Treatment, October 13, 2022.

¹³ Volkow, N., Emergency Departments Can Help Prevent Opioid Overdoses, *National Institute on Drug Abuse, Director's Blog*, August 27, 2019.

¹⁴ National Institute on Drug Abuse, Drug Overdose Deaths: Facts and Figures, CDC WONDER Database.

¹⁵ CDC, Persons Who Inject Drugs Data Summary: Vulnerable Areas for Infectious Diseases in Persons Who Inject Drugs, February 16, 2024.

A
**WALK
FOR CHANGE**

Fundraiser Walk TO END THE **HIV EPIDEMIC**
in Central Florida



**Saturday
December 13, 2025**

THE GROVE

Orlando Packing District

2002 Packing District Way, Orlando, FL 32804

AN INITIATIVE AIMED TO RAISE UNRESTRICTIVE FUNDS FOR PEOPLE WITH HIV AND THE PREVENTION OF NEW HIV DIAGNOSIS IN ORANGE, OSCEOLA, SEMINOLE, AND BREVARD COUNTIES.

FOR MORE INFORMATION GO TO
WWW.AWALKFORCHANGE.COM





www.ocfl.net/ryanwhite



CAN'T WAIT FOR THE NEXT RED RIBBON
TIMES? US EITHER! STAY CONNECTED FOR
ALL THE LATEST INFO ON FACEBOOK @
CENTRALFLORIDAHIVPLANNINGCOUNCIL



CONNECT WITH US ON INSTAGRAM @CFHPC