



RED RIBBON TIMES

2026 Volume 17



14-15

Bridging the Gap



From Diagnosis to Advocacy: A Journey of Healing and Hope

By Velveau Cline

On January 23, 2011—my partner’s birthday—I received a diagnosis that would change my life: AIDS. At the time, I was unaware of what was happening. I had been hospitalized with toxoplasmosis, a serious brain infection, and I was not mentally present. It would be six weeks before I truly understood what was going on.

After my diagnosis, I spent six months in a nursing home for rehabilitation. Formal therapy was limited—only about fifteen minutes a week. Fortunately, I had the unwavering support of my family and partner, who helped me get out of bed, move around, and begin the long process of physical and emotional recovery.

When I returned home, however, I quickly relapsed into addiction. Alcohol and other substances took hold of my life once again. Within weeks, I was back in the hospital—this time with a MRSA

infection in my lungs. My sister stayed by my side as long as she could, but my behavior became too difficult for her to manage.

The first few years after my diagnosis were filled with medical appointments, hospital visits, and ongoing struggles with addiction. My HIV treatment wasn’t effective, largely due to my substance use and inability to stick to my medication regimen. I remained in a cycle of instability, and my health suffered.

In 2013, just before my birthday, my partner ended our relationship. It felt like a breaking point, but in hindsight, it was the beginning of change. As my health declined further and I began experiencing seizures, I noticed many of my friends starting to attend recovery meetings. With nowhere else to turn, I joined them at Alcoholics Anonymous. It was there that I began to take both my sobriety and my HIV diagnosis seriously.

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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

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407-835-0906
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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

One of the most significant turning points in my life came through the guidance of my case manager, Leslie Ann Rodriguez. Along with dedicated doctors, nurses, and the continued support of my family, she played a major role in helping me rebuild. Leslie encouraged me to attend the Ryan White Community Meetings where I began to learn about the healthcare system that supported my care. More importantly, I learned how to advocate for myself—and eventually, for others which led me to joining The Central Florida HIV Planning Council (CFHPC).

Over the years, I've faced additional health challenges, including several hernia surgeries and a kidney transplant. These experiences, though difficult, have only strengthened my gratitude for those working in the system of care. Peer specialists, case managers, and healthcare professionals have all contributed to my survival—and to my growth.

Through it all, I've come to understand the importance of being informed and involved. If a peer specialist can't provide an answer, go to your case manager. If they can't help, don't be afraid to escalate your concerns. Please join us at The Central Florida HIV Planning Council, Ryan White Community Meeting every third Tuesday of the month (www.centralfloridahivpc.com). If you're not receiving the care you deserve, you have the right to seek a different provider. You have the right to be heard, to be treated with dignity, and to receive the care you need and that's exactly what the Central Florida HIV Planning Council provides.

There was a time when I believed I was "dirty" because of my diagnosis. That stigma, rooted in ignorance and shame, stayed with me for years. But today, I know better. I am HIV-positive and undetectable. I've been stable for many years. I still face challenges, but I face them with clarity, hope, and purpose.

I now dedicate my time to helping others who are navigating similar struggles. I love life. I value community. And I am proud to use my story to show others that healing is possible.

MOST OF ALL, I WANT PEOPLE TO KNOW THIS: YOUR DIAGNOSIS DOES NOT DEFINE YOU. YOU ARE WORTHY OF CARE, COMPASSION, AND RESPECT.

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

CFHPC@hfuw.org

**"Drop Us
a Line..."**





Humble Beginnings:

Adya Care Foundation's Journey of Empowerment

Prince Dorvilus and Suanne Vazquez

In the bustling landscape of non-profit organizations, one beacon shines brightly with its commitment to empowerment and inclusivity: Adya Care Foundation. Born from a pharmacist's compassionate heart and a desire to mend the gaps in healthcare accessibility, we embarked on a journey from humble beginnings to become a vital pillar of support for People Living with HIV (PLWH) facing challenges many others take for granted.

Behind the scenes of Adya Care Foundation's impactful initiatives, we stand with a dedication that is an unweaving desire to provide safe spaces and resources for those in need in the community. With no full or part-time paid staff, we rely on the altruism of volunteers and the unwavering support of the local community, agencies, and our organization partners to fulfill our mission. Due to the overwhelming support of our members and volunteers, we forge ahead, and our commitment to compassion, empowerment, and education remains unwavering. With each program, event, and partnership, our members and volunteers continue to sow seeds of support, ensuring that individuals facing health challenges find comfort, guidance, and a sense of belonging. With a vision of a world where everyone has equal access to healthcare resources and support, we stand as a beacon of hope and solidarity in times of need.

At our core lies a profound mission: to provide platforms that are a safe haven for individuals with challenging health backgrounds to interact, educate, collaborate to support one another through their unique health journey and combat social anxiety. From its inception, we and our core volunteers set forth a vision of communities seamlessly accessing critical social services, bridging the gap in understanding medications, addressing health conditions, and combating stigmas. Everyone involved understands that HIV is manageable, not insurmountable, but with the advancements in medication and healthcare, PLWH can live a fulfilling life supported by a community that embraces the values of accessibility, empowerment, and education.

Like the proverbial tree planted for future generations, Adya Care Foundation took root in the heart of its founder, who witnessed firsthand the neglected needs within the healthcare industry.

Fueled by the belief that good people sow seeds of support for others to flourish, we sprouted from a modest dwelling on a front lawn to hosting monthly Community Love Table events at a renowned community center in the heart of Orlando.

As the community commemorates our third anniversary, the journey of evolution and expansion continues. Transitioning from Community Love Feast to Community Love Table, we and our committed volunteers aim to dismantle barriers and ensure equitable access to information and resources for all PWLH and individuals of all backgrounds. With comprehensive programs and ceremonies, we are currently executing and rolling out with our partners like Community Love Table strives to offer critical social services, The Ryan White Outstanding Compassion Awards, where Case Managers & Peers are recognized for their astonishing work for the PWLH community throughout the year, our Golden Unity initiative will create inclusive spaces to address the unique needs of our Golden Community, One Wash at a Time offers assistance with laundry access and a food pantry, PFK provides fresh hot meals to the local community, Adapt A School will create opportunities for high school students to participate in our Internship program, the Enhancing Wellbeing Garden project will provide a peaceful, therapeutic and friendly workspace for our members, and our Hearts in Action initiative allows us to volunteer at symbolic events like the Salvation Army Bazaar sale and An Evening For Others hosted by The Salvation Army. Adya Care Foundation will continue to champion inclusivity and equality.

Adya Care Foundation remains steadfast in its dedication to serving those in need due to unwavering support from SmartCare Rx, with its virtual doors open to all who seek assistance and resources. We are determined to stand as a beacon of hope and solidarity in times of need. We are so thankful to all the members who have put their trust in us to uphold the mission and are truly grateful to the core volunteers who show up day in and day out to provide the support we need to be successful.

For more information about Adya Care Foundation and its initiatives, visit www.adyacare.org or contact info@adyacare.org if you are interested in learning more about how you can be a volunteer today or participate in any of our programs!

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

WITH IRA D. WESTBROOK →

**CENTRAL FLORIDA HIV
PLANNING COUNCIL
PATIENT CARE CLIENT
REPRESENTATIVE &
CO-CHAIR OF THE RYAN WHITE
COMMUNITY MEETING**



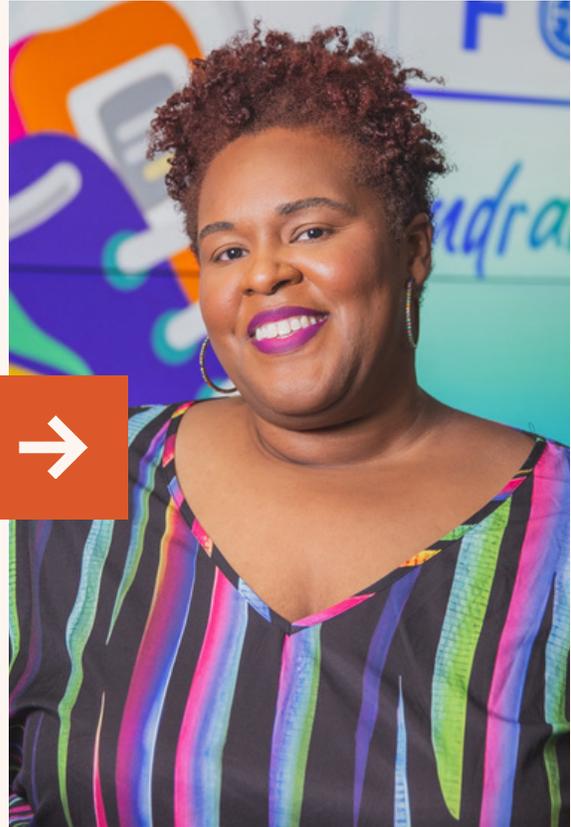
A passionate advocate for RWHAP clients, Ira Darnell Westbrook is a valued and dedicated member of the Central Florida HIV Planning Council. With a background in home healthcare, Orange County Public Schools, and HIV/AIDS Service organizations, Ira brings an abundance of experience and heart to his role on the Planning Council.

Known for speaking his mind and standing firmly for what he feels is right, Ira is committed to ensuring clients receive the services and support they need. He currently serves on the Service Systems Quality Committee, represents clients as the Patient Care Client Representative, and serves as the Co-Chair of the Ryan White Community Meeting.

Ira's dedication and passion doesn't go unnoticed and is appreciated by the Council and the community.

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

WITH KARA WILLIAMS →



CENTRAL FLORIDA HIV PLANNING COUNCIL MEMBERSHIP & ENGAGEMENT COMMITTEE VICE-CHAIR

Q

How did you first get involved with the Planning Council?

I first got involved with the Planning Council through my work in HIV prevention and linkage to care. As a public health professional deeply embedded in the Central Florida HIV community, I saw the Planning Council as a powerful space where decisions were being made that directly impacted the people I serve.

I wanted to ensure that the voices of those most affected—especially Black women, communities of color, and those newly diagnosed—were not only heard but represented in the planning and funding processes.

Q

What does being a Planning Council member mean to you?

Being a member of the Planning Council means having a seat at the table where change is made. It's a responsibility I don't take lightly. It's about listening to community needs, analyzing data, prioritizing resources, and helping shape a system of care that is both equitable and responsive.

Q

What are you most passionate about when it comes to HIV care and support?

I am most passionate about reducing disparities and ensuring that *everyone* has access to comprehensive HIV services.

Prevention through education, testing, and PrEP is critical, but so is creating safe, stigma-free environments where people feel empowered to take charge of their health. I'm especially committed to building culturally responsive programs that meet people where they are, and uplifting grassroots voices in the fight to end the epidemic.



Riding the Tide of Transformation

Healing, Storytelling, and Sustainability in Southern HIV Work

By Anthony McNeil

From July 27–29, 2025, I had the privilege of joining advocates, artists, funders, and frontline workers at the Gilead COMPASS Coordinating Center Grantee Meeting in Fort Lauderdale. This wasn't just another conference—it was a spiritual, professional, and emotional refueling. The theme, "Riding the Tide of Transformation," perfectly captured what it means to do this work in the South, where trauma and joy often sit side by side. Over the course of three powerful sessions, I was reminded that sustainability in HIV work requires more than strategy—it

demands healing, imagination, and a willingness to tell the truth, even when it's uncomfortable.

Over three powerful days, I attended sessions that challenged me to reflect deeply on leadership, storytelling, and sustainability in this work I love. This article is my reflection—a snapshot of the wisdom shared, the connections made, and the hope stirred.

Leading with Healing: Trauma-Informed Leadership for Stronger Teams and Safer Spaces

One of the first sessions invited us to look inward. Trauma is often invisible but profoundly shapes how we show up for ourselves and others. As someone on the front lines of client support, this hit home.

The facilitators asked us to write down one thing we wanted to acknowledge about ourselves. This simple act—self-acknowledgment—was a powerful reminder that caring for ourselves is not selfish, but essential to sustainable leadership.

We talked about how trauma affects team dynamics, especially in HIV work where burnout is common. One takeaway stayed with me: Retention is about people feeling seen. When teams create environments where members feel safe and valued, they thrive and stay committed.

We also explored how personal and generational trauma influences leadership styles. Being trauma-informed means more than knowledge—it's about compassion, presence, and vulnerability. It's about choosing empathy over control, every single day.

Storytelling as Strategy: Creative Paths to HIV Awareness

Another session lifted up storytelling as a powerful tool to break stigma and engage new audiences. Panelists shared inspiring projects—from the film “Ant We Wrestle on Giants,” which opened doors for honest conversations after screenings, to Drag University, an advocacy program training drag performers as HIV educators.

I was moved by how these creative approaches meet people where they are, whether in faith communities, museums, or vibrant cultural spaces. One panelist spoke about partnering with churches and children's museums to host wellness festivals that make HIV conversations natural, accessible, and stigma-free.

For me, this session reignited a belief in the healing power of art and storytelling. Whether through music, community gatherings, or even juice pop-ups, creativity can open hearts and build bridges.

Funding the Future: Bold Strategies for Sustainability

The final panel tackled one of the biggest challenges: keeping our work alive amid shifting funding landscapes. The conversation was refreshingly honest.

Panelists challenged us to shed fear around fundraising. One memorable tip: Don't call your services free—call them complimentary. This shift reframes our work as valuable and deserving of investment.

We learned about the importance of being strategic—building multiple boards, engaging donors differently, and embracing grassroots fundraising not as a last resort, but as a core practice.

But above all, relationships emerged as the real foundation. Funders want authenticity—they want to know the story behind



the service and the people dedicated to making a difference.

A Tide Worth Riding

This conference reminded me that transformation is an ongoing practice. It's in how we lead—with tenderness and strength. It's in how we tell our stories—with honesty and heart. And it's in how we build sustainable futures—through boldness, clarity, and community.

I left Fort Lauderdale recharged and recommitted to this work. To show up fully. To advocate boldly. To lead with love.

Because love, when it's honest and collective, can transform anything.

About the Author

Anthony McNeil is a Certified Lead EHE Peer at the Center for Multicultural Wellness and Prevention and serves as Captain of the Central Florida HIV Stigma Taskforce. He is the current Co-Chair of the Service Systems & Quality Committee of the Central Florida HIV Planning Council. In his outreach work,

Anthony is dedicated to helping clients overcome barriers to care through culturally responsive support, honest conversation, and community-centered advocacy. He believes deeply in meeting people where they are—with compassion, dignity, and a commitment to walking beside them.

Outside of advocacy, Anthony performs under the name TilltheAM and is the founder of Ase Juices LLC, a wellness brand rooted in the healing power of natural ingredients and radical self-love.





Beyond the Viral Load

By Brian Toy & Jesus Cheverez Negrón, APRN, FNP-C at Invested Health Center | Orlando, FL

**“YOU’RE UNDETECTABLE—GREAT!
SEE YOU IN A YEAR?”**

If you’re living with HIV, you’ve probably heard some version of this during your medical visits. And while keeping your viral load undetectable is a huge success worth celebrating, that’s not the full story when it comes to your health.

People with HIV are living longer, healthier lives than ever before. But living longer also means navigating other health risks that

come with aging—like heart disease, certain cancers, diabetes, and mental health concerns. Some of these are even more common in people with HIV than in those without.

That’s why your checkups should include more than just HIV labs. You deserve care that looks at your whole health, not just your diagnosis.

So what does that actually include? And how can you make the most of your every visit with your provider?

Your HIV Care Checklist: What to Screen for Each Year

Here's a simple breakdown of recommended preventive screenings and tests. You can even bring this list to your next appointment and ask your provider about anything that hasn't been checked recently.

Category	What to Screen/Test	How Often
HIV Lab Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Viral load (HIV RNA)— are you undetectable? • CD4 count—is your immune system strong? • Resistance testing if your viral load goes up • Talk about meds and any side effects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every 3–4 months until you're stably undetectable • Then every 6 months once stable
STI & Hepatitis Screening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chlamydia & gonorrhea (urine, throat, rectal) • Syphilis blood test • Hepatitis C if you have risk factors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Once a year, at minimum • Every 3–6 months if you're having sex with new or multiple partners
Cervical & Anal Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cervical Pap (for people with a cervix) • Anal Pap (for MSM, trans women, or anyone with past dysplasia) • Mammogram (for breasts, cis or trans women) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pap tests: at diagnosis → again in 12 months if normal → after 3 normals, every 3 years • Anal Pap: yearly • Mammogram: every 2 years from age 40 to 74
Vaccines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flu shot • COVID-19 booster • Hepatitis A & B (if you haven't had them) • HPV (up to age 45) • Mpox if your doctor recommends • Pneumococcal (pneumonia) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow your provider's advice—usually your primary provider or HIV team will let you know which ones are due this year
Heart & Metabolic Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blood pressure check • Cholesterol (lipid) blood test • Blood sugar/A1c • Height & weight (BMI) • Tobacco use discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blood pressure/BMI/tobacco: every visit (at least once a year) • Cholesterol: every 1–5 years • Blood sugar: every 3 years (sooner if you have diabetes risk)
Mood & Substance Check-In	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depression screen (PHQ-9) • Anxiety screen • Alcohol use (AUDIT-C) • Drug & substance use chat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At your first HIV visit, then at least once a year (or more often if you're feeling stressed)
Bones & Vitamin D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bone density scan (DEXA) if you're older or at higher risk • Vitamin D level if you've got bone or absorption issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One DEXA at age 65 (or younger if your provider thinks you need it) → follow up based on results • Vitamin D as your doctor suggests
Teeth & Gums	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dental exam & gum check • Look for mouth sores or signs of thrush/HPV 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every 6 months is ideal (or at least once a year)
Brain & Nerves	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Memory or thinking questions • Check for nerve pain or tingling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At your first visit and anytime you notice new issues

Why It Matters: Prevention = Power

“When your HIV is under control, that’s a huge victory. But that’s also the time to check in on everything else that helps you stay well—your heart, your mind, your bones, and even your smile.”

— Jesus Cheverez Negron, APRN

Getting these screenings isn't just about checking boxes—it's about catching

small issues early before they turn into something bigger. It's about you staying in control of your health. And it's about recognizing that HIV doesn't define your body or your future.

Your Health, Your Voice

You have the right to ask questions. You have the right to bring up what's bothering you—even if it doesn't seem related to

HIV. And you absolutely have the right to receive care that sees all of you, not just your labs.

If it's been more than a year since you've had some of these screenings, bring this article to your next visit. Talk with your provider. You're not being difficult—you're being proactive.

Because staying undetectable is just the beginning. You deserve to thrive.

HIV in the South



The American South, and particularly the “Deep South**” experiences a higher burden of HIV and a lower PrEP use compared to other regions in the country. Social determinants of health (SDOH), such as poverty, health insurance coverage, housing stability, racism and stigma, play a large role in driving the inequities that exist in the Southern HIV epidemic by creating barriers to HIV testing, prevention, treatment and care services.

*The “Deep South” includes Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas

New HIV Diagnoses in the South



In 2022, the South accounted for **52% of new HIV diagnoses**, despite only representing **38% of the U.S. population.**

Source: AIDSVu, CDC, ACS 2022 5 Year Estimates

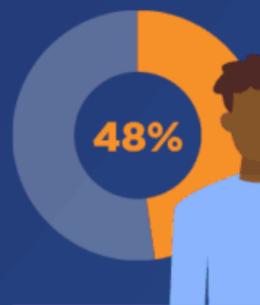
HIV and PrEP Use Among Black and Hispanic Communities in the South

In 2022, Black people represented nearly **half of all new HIV diagnoses in the South**, but only **23% of Southern PrEP users** in 2024.

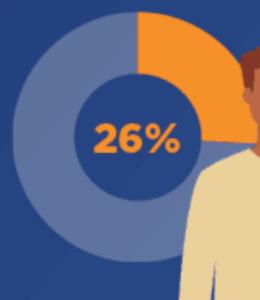
In 2022, Hispanic individuals accounted for **26% of new HIV diagnoses in the South**, but only **19% of Southern PrEP users** in 2024.

Source: AIDSVu, CDC

Southern New HIV Diagnoses, % Black Persons, 2022

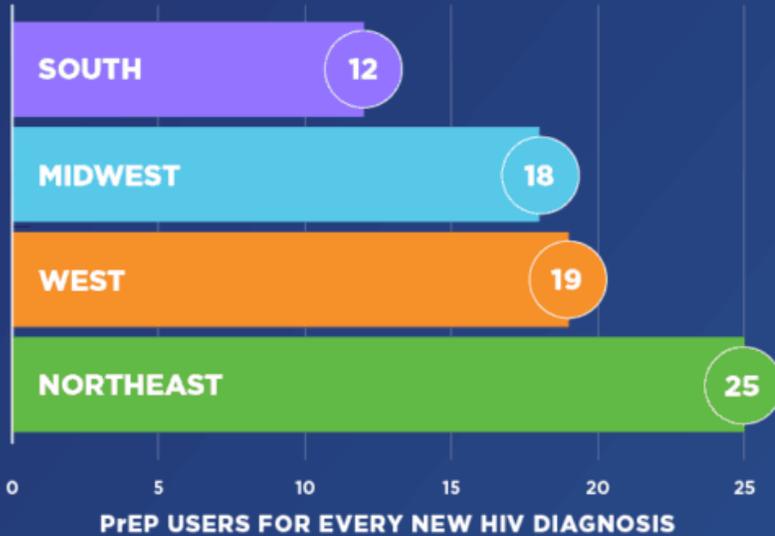


Southern New HIV Diagnoses, % Hispanic Persons, 2022



PrEP Use in the South

In 2024, the **South had the lowest PrEP-to-Need Ratio (PnR)**, meaning that it had the greatest unmet need for PrEP across all regions.



PrEP-to-Need Ratio (PnR) by Region, 2024
Source: AIDSvu (from 2025 PrEP Launch Insights)

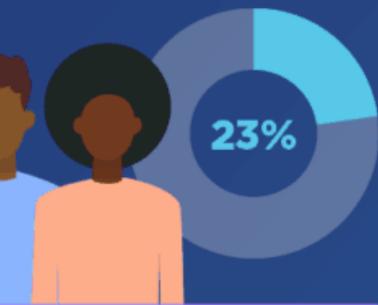
Knowledge of HIV Status in the South

In 2022, **14% of people living with HIV in the South were unaware of their HIV status.**

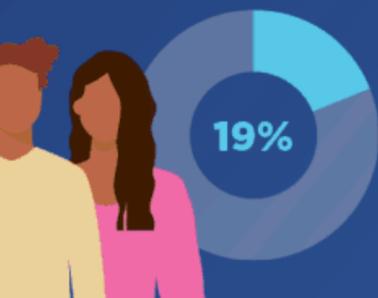


Source: CDC AtlasPlus

Southern PrEP Users, % Black Persons, 2024



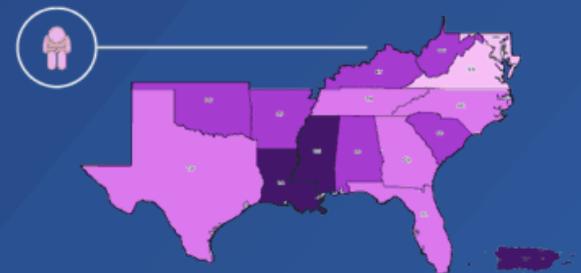
Southern PrEP Users, % Hispanic Persons, 2024



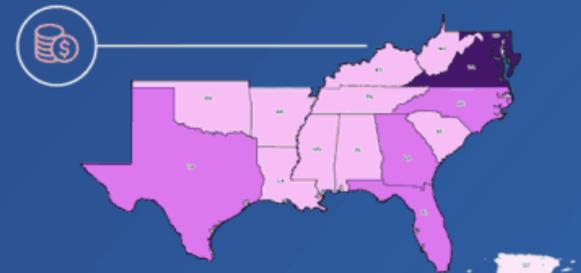
Social Determinants of Health in the South

In 2022, the South had the **highest poverty rate and lowest median household income** compared to other regions across the country. These factors and other SDOH may contribute to the higher rates of HIV in the South.

Source: ACS 2022 5-year Estimates



Percent of Population Living in Poverty, 2022



Median Household Income, 2022





The Sangster Effect:

The Importance of Advocacy

by Paolo Mancini

In my life there have been a handful of individuals that have truly shaped my belief system on how I view life. About ten years ago, I met an amazing advocate for mental health named Yvette Sangster. Sadly, she passed away a few years ago, but one thing Yvette taught me was “If you ever get the chance to decide how funding is used for a cause that you are struggling with, you better take it; because no one will ever know, more than you will, what the struggles for that community really are.” Today, I honestly believe in the power of self-advocacy, especially when it comes to mental health, substance use, and HIV.

Self-advocacy is incredibly important for individuals living with HIV in Central Florida, as it is everywhere. It’s about empowering oneself to navigate the healthcare system, access necessary resources, combat stigma, and live a full and healthy life. Central Florida faces unique challenges and opportunities that make self-advocacy particularly crucial.

Importance of Self-Advocacy in Central Florida:

1. High Prevalence and Need for Resources: Florida consistently ranks among the states with the highest rates of new HIV diagnoses, and Central Florida (including the Orlando metropolitan area) is often cited as a significant hotspot. This means there’s a substantial population needing care, prevention, and support services. Self-advocacy ensures individuals don’t get lost in the system and actively seek out the services they need.
2. Navigating a Complex System: The Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program provides

vital federal funding for care and support services. However, accessing these services often involves eligibility requirements, case management, and referrals to various providers (medical, dental, mental health, housing, transportation, etc.). Self-advocacy allows clients to understand these processes, ask questions, and ensure they receive the full spectrum of available support.

3. Combating Stigma and Discrimination: Despite medical advancements, HIV-related stigma persists. In a region like Central Florida, which is diverse but can also have conservative elements, individuals living with HIV may face discrimination in healthcare settings, employment, housing, or social interactions. Self-advocacy equips individuals with the knowledge and confidence to challenge stigma and assert their rights.
4. Ensuring Person-Centered Care: Healthcare should be tailored to the individual’s needs, preferences, and goals. Self-advocacy empowers clients to communicate what’s important to them, discuss treatment options, voice concerns about side effects, and participate actively in decisions about their own health. This is crucial for adherence to medication and overall well-being.
5. Staying Informed about Treatment Advancements: HIV treatment has evolved dramatically. New medications, prevention strategies (like PrEP and nPEP), and research breakthroughs are constantly emerging. Self-advocacy means staying informed about these developments and discussing them with healthcare providers to ensure the best possible care.
6. Addressing Co-occurring Conditions: People living with HIV often face co-occurring health issues (e.g., mental health challenges, substance use disorders, other STIs) and social determinants of health (e.g., unstable housing, food insecurity). Self-advocacy is vital for addressing these interconnected needs and ensuring holistic care.
7. Contributing to Policy and Systemic Change: When individuals advocate for their own needs, they often highlight systemic gaps or barriers. This collective voice can lead to policy changes, improved service delivery, and more equitable access to care for the entire community.

Examples of What a Client Can Do to Advocate for This Issue:

Self-advocacy can take many forms, from

personal interactions to broader community engagement.

A. Personal Self-Advocacy in Healthcare and Services:

1. Know Your Rights:
 - Educate Yourself: Learn about HIV/AIDS, your treatment plan, and available resources (Ryan White services, ADAP - AIDS Drug Assistance Program, HOPWA - Housing Opportunities for People With AIDS, and local support organizations/clinics).
 - Understand Patient Rights: Be aware of your rights as a patient, including confidentiality, informed consent, and the right to a second opinion.
 - Know Your Eligibility: Understand the criteria for programs like Ryan White Part A/B and ADAP, and ensure you have the necessary documentation.
2. Active Participation in Healthcare:
 - Prepare for Appointments: Write down questions and concerns before seeing your doctor, case manager, or other providers.
 - Ask Questions: Don’t be afraid to ask for clarification if you don’t understand medical jargon, treatment plans, or service processes. “Can you explain that in simpler terms?” or “What are my other options?” are powerful questions.
 - Take Notes (or Bring Someone to Help): It’s easy to forget information during an appointment. Jot down key points or ask a trusted friend or family member to accompany you and take notes.
 - Communicate Honestly: Share all relevant health information, concerns, and any challenges you’re facing (e.g., medication adherence issues, side effects, mental health struggles) with your care team. They can only help if they know.
 - Request Records: You have a right to your medical records. Ask for copies of lab results, treatment summaries, and other relevant documents.
 - Seek Second Opinions: If you have doubts about a diagnosis or treatment plan, it’s your right to seek another professional opinion.
3. Managing Your Care and Resources:
 - Regularly Communicate with Your Case Manager: Your case manager is a key advocate. Keep them updated on your needs and challenges, and ask them for assistance in navigating the system.
 - Follow Up on Referrals: Ensure you follow through on referrals to specialists or support services. If there are barriers (transportation, cost), communicate

them.

- Address Financial Concerns: If you're struggling with medication costs, copays, or living expenses, speak up. There are programs like ADAP and housing assistance (HOPWA) that can help, but you need to ask.

B. Community and Systemic Self-Advocacy:

1. Join a Planning Council or Advisory Group:
 - HIV Planning Council: As discussed, the Central Florida HIV Planning Council (CFHPC) is a federal mandated body that determines how Ryan White funds are allocated. Joining as a consumer (person living with HIV) allows you to directly influence policies and funding priorities that impact your life and community.
 - Client Advisory Groups (CAGs): Many individual AIDS Service Organizations (ASOs) and clinics have client advisory groups. These groups provide direct feedback to the providers on the quality and accessibility of services. The Florida Department of Health in Orange County, for example, has a Client Advisory Group for its Sunshine Care Center.
2. Participate in Public Comment:
 - Submit Written Comments: Take advantage of opportunities to submit written comments to the HIV Planning Council or other relevant bodies (county commissioners, state health department) on issues affecting people with HIV. Even if a home address is required, the content of your message is powerful.
 - Speak at Public Meetings: If comfortable, attend public meetings (like those of the HIV Planning Council) and provide verbal testimony. Sharing your personal story (within your comfort level of disclosure) can be incredibly impactful.
3. Engage with Advocacy Organizations:
 - Local Organizations: Connect with local Central Florida organizations/clinics. Many of these organizations have advocacy initiatives or can connect you with opportunities. Many of them also offer support groups for individuals living with HIV.
 - Statewide Groups: The Florida HIV/AIDS Advocacy Network (FHAAN) is a key statewide organization that advocates for resources, policies, and legislation affecting people with HIV/AIDS in Florida.
 - National Organizations: While local impact is key, national organizations like

AdventHealth Champions Routine HIV Screening in Honor of National HIV Testing Day

In celebration of National HIV Testing Day, AdventHealth reaffirmed its commitment to early detection and prevention through the implementation of routine HIV screening across its healthcare system. On June 27, 2025, Dr. Kenneth Schepcke, Deputy Secretary for Health for the Florida Department of Health, joined healthcare leaders to highlight the success of this initiative and recognize AdventHealth's adoption of the FOCUS model—a strategic approach to normalizing HIV testing in clinical care.

The FOCUS (Frontlines of Communities in the United States) model, developed by Gilead Sciences, was officially adopted by AdventHealth on March 26, 2025. Since its inception, and as of June 20, 2025, AdventHealth has conducted over 10,000 HIV tests through routine screening and identified 44 individuals living with HIV, successfully connecting them to care and treatment.

Currently, routine HIV screening is being conducted at the Downtown Advent Princeton Emergency Room location, marking a pivotal step in integrating testing into ER settings. However, within the next six months, AdventHealth plans to expand routine screening to additional campuses, with the goal of also including syphilis and hepatitis C testing—a move that will strengthen its comprehensive approach to infectious disease prevention and early intervention.

A critical component of this success has been the partnership and support provided by the Area 7 Program Office. The Linkage to Care Team and Early Intervention Specialists have worked tirelessly to ensure that individuals identified through this initiative are immediately connected to HIV care and essential support services. Their coordinated

AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF) and The Well Project also offer resources and opportunities for advocacy.

4. Educate and Raise Awareness:

- Share Your Story (If Comfortable): Personal narratives can be powerful in combating stigma and educating others. This can be through speaking engagements, social media, or simply conversations with friends and family.
- Challenge Misinformation: Correct misconceptions about HIV/AIDS when you hear them, respectfully.
- Promote Testing and Prevention: Encourage others to get tested and learn about prevention methods like PrEP. For example, "Talk, Test, Treat Central Florida" is a great local initiative for this.

response has transformed routine testing into rapid action—moving people from diagnosis to treatment without delay.

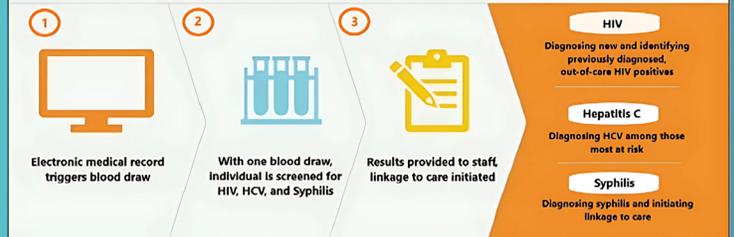


Dr. Kenneth Schepcke, Deputy Secretary for Health for the Florida Department of Health

Additionally, many of the newly diagnosed clients have been successfully linked through the Rapid Start Program at Sunshine Care Center, where they receive timely access to antiretroviral therapy,

THE FOCUS MODEL

- Efficiently Addressing Three Public Health Epidemics:
- Identifying HIV, HCV, and Syphilis with One Blood Draw



counseling, and wraparound services. This model not only improves health outcomes but also plays a key role in reducing community-level transmission.

Dr. Schepcke emphasized that integrating HIV screening into routine care is a vital public health strategy. By making testing standard practice, health systems can reduce stigma, increase early detection, and ultimately improve patient outcomes and community health.

5. Contact Elected Officials:

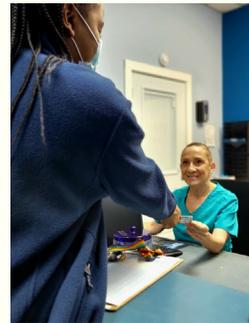
- Write Letters/Emails: Contact your county commissioners, state representatives, and senators to express your concerns or support for legislation affecting people with HIV/AIDS.
- Attend Town Halls: Engage with elected officials at public forums to voice your concerns.

By actively engaging in these forms of self-advocacy, individuals living with HIV/AIDS in Central Florida can significantly improve their own care, contribute to a more supportive and informed community, and help drive positive systemic change in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Change is possible. Be the change. And that is the Sangster Effect.

BRIDGING THE GAP: 10 YEARS OF SAVING LIVES AND ADVANCING EQUITY IN FLORIDA

BY JOSIANE S. COBB



Where It All Began: A Humble Start

Imagine a small, modest office nestled along Orange Blossom Trail, buzzing with activity. A single, worn wooden desk stacked high with paperwork, one small exam room, and a passionate vision burning bright in the hearts of a dedicated team. The scent of freshly printed pamphlets fills the air, blending with soft, hopeful conversations. Ten years ago, this small space birthed Positive Assistance, Inc., a beacon of hope for underserved communities in Central Florida.

Growing to Serve: Clinic Expansion and Mobile Outreach

From those humble beginnings, Positive Assistance has blossomed dramatically. We've expanded to a fully equipped, vibrant non-traditional primary care clinic on West Colonial Drive, featuring state-of-the-art examination rooms, inviting an inclusive waiting area, and a compassionate medical staff eager to serve. Recognizing the barriers—stigma, fear, transportation—that often prevent patients from accessing care, Positive Assistance boldly acquired two innovative Mobile Units. These brightly colored vehicles traverse neighborhoods across Orange County and beyond, bringing vital HIV testing and counseling, health education, glucose and pregnancy testing, and compassionate healthcare directly to those who need it most. Our services extend throughout the diverse neighborhoods of Orlando, from Silver Star and Pine Hills to Americana Boulevard. We specifically serve marginalized communities, including Black, Latino, Haitian, LGBTQ+, immigrants, and others disproportionately impacted by HIV.

Our dedicated outreach teams tirelessly work to reduce stigma and misinformation about HIV prevention through engaging community workshops, mobile testing, and educational sessions about life-saving treatments such as Test & Treat, PrEP, and nPEP. Our compassionate staff helps fearful or hesitant patients navigate complex healthcare paths with dignity and confidence.

• Services Offered:

- Primary Care Services
- Rapid HIV, STI Testing, and Treatment
- Case Management
- Early Intervention Specialist
- PEER Support Group
- Mental Health Counseling
- Oral Health Care
- Medication Therapy Management
- PrEP and nPEP Services
- Mobile Healthcare Units
- Transportation assistance (Uber, Lynx, and Lyft)

Our extended clinic hours—Monday through Friday (7 a.m. to 7 p.m.) and Saturday and Sunday from (1 p.m. to 5 p.m.)—ensure no patient goes without critical care, regardless of their situation.

Building Trust: Partnerships and Faith-Based Initiatives

Positive Assistance deeply values our partnerships, especially our longstanding collaboration

with the Florida Department of Health, Center for Multicultural Wellness and Prevention, local churches, and over 40 community partners. Under the leadership of Rev. A.J. Johnson, our innovative F.A.C.T.S. (Faith-based AIDS Coalition for Technical Assistance and Services) program has significantly increased HIV awareness, education, and prevention in local congregations. This partnership bridges faith and health, reducing stigma and encouraging community participation in health initiatives.

We've expanded our influence and support through our active social media platforms and engaging talk shows, spreading critical awareness in accessible, relatable ways.

People Behind the Passion: Our Team

At Positive Assistance, our dedicated team is the driving force behind our success. Led by our tireless CEO, Andre Antenor, whose background as Case Manager and Disease Intervention Specialist (DIS) keeps him deeply connected to client care, our staff go above and beyond daily. Whether it's burning the midnight oil to ensure no client goes untreated or personally overseeing outreach efforts, Andre exemplifies leadership rooted in compassion and dedication.

Our medical team consists of experienced professionals, including licensed physicians, nurse practitioners, skilled medical assistants, and caring phlebotomists. Each brings expertise and a commitment to excellence, ensuring quality care for every individual. Complementing our clinical staff, our outreach team actively engages communities not only in Orlando but also during impactful events in areas such as Miami. They tirelessly educate communities about the importance and availability of PrEP and nPEP medications, addressing misconceptions and fears head-on. Through engaging presentations and compassionate conversations, they make lifesaving knowledge accessible.

During outreach events, our team provides educational materials, rapid testing, and personalized consultations. They also distribute thoughtfully prepared giveaways—including self-care kits, health essentials, condoms, and culturally relevant items—creating trust and openness within communities.

Our multilingual staff—fluent in English, Spanish, Haitian Creole, and Portuguese—break language barriers, offering care that feels safe, non-judgmental, personal, and respectful in the client's native language. At Positive Assistance, we believe everyone deserves quality healthcare delivered with dignity, kindness, and warmth.

A Night to Remember: Celebrating 10 Years

Recently, Positive Assistance celebrated our 10-year anniversary in an unforgettable night filled with heartfelt stories, joyous laughter, and a vibrant sense of community. Partners, clients, and staff gathered together, reflecting on the decade-long journey of transformation, hope, and countless lives positively impacted.

A recent community survey highlighted our remarkable success, with over 5,124 patients receiving essential care, affirming our mission to empower communities toward healthier, brighter futures. In addition, more than 6,000 individuals were tested and now know their status.

Looking Ahead: The Next Chapter

As we look forward, Positive Assistance remains dedicated to expanding our outreach, enhancing our services, and continuing our commitment to health equity. Our mobile outreach teams plan to reach even more underserved communities across Florida, continuing our legacy of compassionate care, education, and transformation.

Positive Assistance isn't just about providing healthcare—we are a symbol of hope, resilience, and enduring community spirit, continually reminding Central Florida that together, we can overcome any obstacle. Positive Assistance is more than a non-profit organization; it is a true home of care and hope for everyone, regardless of origin or immigration status.



April Johnson – Center for Multicultural Wellness and Prevention (CMWP); Anthony McNeil – Center for Multicultural Wellness and Prevention (CMWP); Pastor Arnold Johnson – Positive Assistance Community Liaison; Ida Starks – HIV Advocate / Speaker



“MEETING PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE!”

Our pledge is to assist and give hope to people living with chronic illnesses or at risk of acquiring chronic illnesses.

7156 W. COLONIAL DR., ORLANDO, FL, 32818, CONNECT WITH US:



Phone: (407) 412-6569 | (877) 801-4086 | (321) 779-PrEP (7737) info@positiveassistance.org



www.ocfl.net/ryanwhite



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