



WORLD AIDS DAY

2020



How Employers Can Support Those Living with and Affected by HIV and AIDS

On World AIDS Day each year millions of people across the globe band together to show support for people living with HIV or AIDS and honor those who have died due to AIDS-related illnesses. Founded in 1988 and commemorated annually on December 1st, World AIDS Day is a worldwide demonstration of community, awareness, and resilience in the face an epidemic that has claimed roughly 33 million lives.

Over the last two decades, the intensifying efforts to raise awareness and end global HIV and AIDS have contributed to an overall reduction in the number of diagnoses. According to UNAIDS, there has been a downward trend in overall new HIV infections. Since the peak of infections in 1998, new HIV infections have declined 40% – new HIV infections were roughly 2.8 million in 1998 compared to 1.7 million in 2019. Even from 2010 to 2019, there was an estimated 23% decline in new HIV infections overall.



COVID-19 & HIV and AIDS

This year, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has presented new challenges to those living with HIV and AIDS. While the full effect of COVID-19 on those living with HIV or AIDS is not yet known, individuals with more advanced cases of HIV or AIDS and those who are not receiving HIV treatment may be at an increased risk of developing serious complications from COVID-19. Health experts continue to draw parallels between the pandemics of HIV and COVID-19, both of which have most severely impacted marginalized communities and demonstrate how inequalities – racial, economic and more - are interconnected.

The Facts

Despite significant progress made in combatting the virus, the HIV and AIDS epidemic is not over. Last year alone, 38 million people worldwide were living with HIV or AIDS, while, tragically, AIDS-related illnesses claimed the lives of 690,000 individuals.

HIV and AIDS disproportionately affect Black and transgender communities. In the United States, the latest CDC estimates demonstrate that Black individuals account for 42% of HIV diagnoses, despite the fact that they account for 13% of the population. While one in six white men who have sex with men (MSM) are likely to be diagnosed with HIV in their lifetime, the likelihood is significantly higher for Black MSM – one out of two of whom will likely be diagnosed. A recent CDC analysis also shines light on the racial disparities in the transgender community – finding that an estimated 44% of Black transgender women have been diagnosed with HIV compared to 7% of white transgender women.



The Facts (continued)

Within the United States, rates vary by region. The South has the highest rates of HIV diagnoses in the country and also made up more than half of new HIV cases in the latest CDC research. According to the Williams Institute, more new HIV infections among MSM come from the South more than any other region, while about half of transgender individuals diagnosed with HIV live in the South.

As the virus continues to persist, so too does the stigma that surrounds it. Negative attitudes, prejudice, and discrimination are everyday realities for those living with HIV and AIDS. Many falsely believe that only certain groups of people can get HIV (such as sex workers or gay men) while others make moral judgements around HIV status, believing that immoral choices lead to the contraction of the virus. For this reason, many of those living with HIV and AIDS face discrimination or prejudice – such as being refused healthcare or shunned by those closest to them. This affects the emotional well-being of those living with HIV and can lead to feelings of despair, internalized stigma, and isolation. In many cases, the stigma can even prevent some individuals from preventing HIV transmission, getting tested, and seeking treatment.

This stigma makes clear the human and emotional impact of HIV and AIDS, as well as the continued importance of raising awareness, educating others, and fighting for greater support of the community.



Five ways employers can engage year-round to support those living with, and affected by, HIV and AIDS

1. Use Accurate Language: HIV is Not AIDS

While shorthand references to “HIV/AIDS” are common, it is important in both official messaging and informal conversations to distinguish between human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). Because of the development and wider availability of antiviral treatments, most people in the United States living with HIV will not develop AIDS. Many members of today’s workforce were exposed to headlines and conversations about deaths related to AIDS as their first entrée into the subject. It is therefore imperative to recognize today’s reality that millions of people are living with HIV and to not reaffirm outdated fears or stereotypes implying otherwise.

In framing messages, employers should take care to separate HIV and AIDS by using phrases such as the following:

“We offer the following benefits and support for those living with HIV...”

“On this World AIDS Day, we remember those lost to AIDS-related illnesses and we reaffirm our support for all those living with HIV or AIDS around the world today...”

“For inquiries related to HIV and AIDS-related EAP support, please contact HR...”

Acknowledging the distinction between HIV and AIDS is not simply a superficial language tweak, but a meaningful statement demonstrating an employer or individual’s understanding of the lived realities for millions of people today.



2. Be Part of the Solution: Employer-Provided Health Insurance

Employers play a crucial role in providing healthcare coverage for those living with HIV and AIDS and more broadly in helping to achieve an HIV-free generation. Antiretroviral therapy is part of a standard treatment plan for people living with HIV, according to the National Institutes of Health, and employers should ensure best-in-class in-network providers as well as EAP support that is culturally competent.

Increasingly, employers are ensuring that employees and covered dependents can access pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) to effectively prevent the transmission of HIV. They can also work with their insurers to assess network coverage and healthcare professionals with appropriate cultural competence to administer and monitor patients on PrEP. Spotlighting these benefits during open enrollment alongside other notable features of plan offerings is both practical and an important signifier of how comprehensively an employer views the evolving needs of its workforce.

Lambda Legal provides a helpful primer for individuals on HIV and Health Insurance.



3. Understand Legal Protections for HIV and AIDS-affected Workers in the United States

According to the [US Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division resource](#), the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) – which grants civil rights protections to individuals with disabilities similar to those provided on the basis of race, color, sex, national origin, age, and religion – includes protections for individuals living with HIV and AIDS. It also guarantees equal opportunity for these individuals in public accommodations, employment, transportation, state and local government services, and telecommunications.

Persons who are discriminated against because they are thought to be HIV-positive are also protected. For example, the ADA would protect a person who is denied an occupational license or job on the basis of a rumor or assumption that the individual has HIV or AIDS, even if that is not true.

A best practice for employers is to periodically review and refresh trainings, educational materials, and employee handbooks – especially for hiring managers, customer/client-facing staff, and supervisors – to support consistent awareness of the federal protections afforded to all those living with HIV or AIDS and those assumed or rumored to be living with HIV or AIDS. Employers should also address any flourishing rumors about a client or employee's HIV status. It is never OK for public speculation about such health matters in the workplace.



4. Support Employees in Travel and Relocation

An ever-global mobile workforce demands supportive infrastructure for employees and/or their family members who are HIV positive.* According to [UNAIDS](#), around the world, 48 countries have HIV-related travel restrictions, namely:

1. HIV testing required for work permits.
2. HIV testing required for study permits.
3. HIV testing or disclosure required for certain permits or entry less than 90 days.
4. HIV testing required for residency permits (for stays longer than 90 days).
5. Prohibit entry and stay for less than 90 days on the basis of HIV status.
6. Residency permits denied (for stays longer than 90 days) on the basis of HIV status.
7. Non-nationals living with HIV are deported on the basis of their HIV status.

Global employers should ensure that employees are given appropriate contacts – typically within HR – to confidentially discuss any concerns or questions about their, or their family member’s, HIV or AIDS status in relation to temporary assignment, short-term business trips, or indefinite long-term relocation. Managers should proactively note resources available as part of any relocation or travel assignments and ensure that one’s concerns or questions about travel to countries with restrictions do not negatively affect an employee’s career. Global employers may also decide to move employees who wish to leave their home countries because of punitive HIV and AIDS laws, just as they would for other employee mobility considerations.

*This information is updated as of December 2020. Many countries continue to have travel restrictions due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Employers may consider providing additional resources to employees living in countries with COVID-19 related restrictions to ensure that those living with HIV or AIDS maintain access to critical services without disruption.



5. Support LGBTQ Resource Groups in HIV and AIDS-Related Programming

The first patient of the AIDS epidemic was identified in 1981 – which with today’s workforce may very well predate some of your company or organization’s key employee resource group leaders’ consciousness. For others in your ERG, the AIDS epidemic may continue to be a defining part of adult life. World AIDS Day and, more broadly, HIV and AIDS-themed discussions and programming can present valuable opportunities for intergenerational dialogue on how HIV and AIDS has affected their lives and relationship to the broader LGBTQ community.

The following films and events are just a few examples of great centerpieces for programming when followed by panels of employees discussing their relationship to the content.

- *We Were Here (film)*
- *The Surviving Voices Project (miniseries)*
- *The AIDS Memorial Quilt (event and resource)*
- *Angels in America (miniseries)*
- *Rent (film)*
- *Philadelphia (film)*
- *Last Men Standing (film)*
- *How to Survive a Plague (film)*

In addition, programming might entail taking part in community and national events that bring communities together in the fight against HIV/AIDS and memorialize the lives lost to the epidemic. For instance, last year, Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Congresswoman Barbara Lee,

and Congressman John Lewis joined congressional leaders at The Library of Congress in a moving ceremony to announce the future of the AIDS Memorial Quilt and Archive Collection, prior to World AIDS Day. To view the event, [click here](#).

Another example is the annual commemoration hosted by [The National AIDS Memorial Grove](#) every year on World AIDS Day. Because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the organization will host this event virtually this year. The event is free and features keynotes from Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and Dr. David D. Ho, Director of the Aaron Diamond AIDS Research Center at Columbia University. To learn more, [click here](#).



Closing

Since the beginning of the epidemic, it is the tireless work of both LGBTQ and ally advocates – many of whom were fighting for their lives at the hands of AIDS-related illnesses – that made the difference in raising critical awareness of the virus and pushing for solutions.

On World AIDS Day, we honor their legacy and those who lost their lives by continuing their important work, supporting those still afflicted by the virus, and working together to end HIV and AIDS across the world.

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