



Policy Brief

April, 2009

AIDS Action Committee calls for an integrated, comprehensive HIV testing plan for Massachusetts

More than 8,000 of the estimated 25,000 Massachusetts residents who are living with HIV do not yet know their HIV status. About one third of people who are newly diagnosed with HIV each year have already progressed to an AIDS diagnosis¹ making it more difficult and costly to manage and treat their disease.

These statistics are especially alarming in a state that has pioneered health care reform and has arguably one of the best HIV service systems in the country. **It is imperative that we find new ways of identifying people living with HIV and connect them to care.** Effective, integrated HIV screening in a variety of settings has the potential to help many people with HIV learn about their status earlier and gain timely access to HIV care and treatment. Early testing is also critical to stopping the spread of new infections.

One of AIDS Action Committee's primary goals is to find people who are unaware of their HIV status and connect them to care. In order to reach this goal we need a robust HIV testing system that is designed not only to screen more people for HIV, but one that simultaneously identifies those people at greatest risk for HIV infection who will likely not be seen in traditional medical settings.

To meet these objectives requires the development of a comprehensive and aggressive HIV testing plan that includes the following elements:

- Integration of HIV screening and testing in clinical settings
- Assurance of patient confidentiality
- Targeted community based testing for people at the highest risk
- Training for medical professionals that increases HIV testing and prompt recognition of medical indications of HIV infection
- Prompt referral and retention of HIV positive patients into care
- Ensure reimbursement mechanisms for HIV screening and HIV diagnosis as part of health care reform.

Because such a plan must have broad support, AIDS Action will convene a working group comprised of consumers; HIV advocates, medical professionals; providers; legislators; payers; and lawyers to identify the spectrum of barriers to HIV testing and care and develop strategies to decrease the number of people who do not know their HIV status and get them connected to appropriate care and support.

I. Improve the HIV Testing Process

There is a need to adopt policies to substantially improve identification of HIV positive patients who are unaware of their HIV status and increase offers of HIV testing across all health care settings including hospitals, urgent care settings, community health centers, emergency departments, and private practice. Identifying patients who are unknowingly infected with HIV requires taking physician time constraints into consideration, as well as the barriers patients may experience accessing the health care system.

The integration of HIV testing in clinical settings has several important benefits such as identifying people living with HIV who would otherwise not have tested; decreasing the number of people who are diagnosed with an advanced stage of HIV; and increasing the number of tests offered by medical professionals. Earlier diagnosis of HIV infection and entry to care will reduce the risk of illness and death for persons living with the virus. Research has also shown that people who know their HIV status are less likely to transmit the virus to their others.

There are many barriers, some real and some perceived, to wide-spread integration of HIV testing in clinical settings. Barriers that have been identified include the requirement for written informed consent, burden of time on medical personnel, need for additional training, lack of support to refer positive patients, and internal policies that exempt Emergency Rooms from performing routine HIV tests.

In order to address these issues, a *comprehensive* routine testing plan must be developed and implemented with the support of the HIV/AIDS and medical communities, the Department of Public Health, and the Massachusetts Legislature.

II. Ensure Patient Confidentiality

As with all public health activities, strict protection of patient confidentiality must be maintained for all persons offered and receiving HIV services, including HIV counseling and testing. Providers need to be familiar with their agencies' confidentiality policies, which should be visibly posted and available to patients upon request, as well as legal and ethical requirements. This is particularly important given the level of stigma and discrimination that exists for those living with HIV/AIDS.

III. Identify People with Greatest Risk Factors

Targeting HIV testing at high-risk groups and populations may be a more effective method of identifying people who are unaware of their status than conducting widespread routine HIV testing. Community based programs could identify new HIV cases by targeting addiction-treatment facilities, mental health facilities, prisons, and community health centers in high-risk neighborhoods by using rapid testing and referring those with positive results to a health care facility for a confirmation test. These target groups have a higher risk of contracting HIV than the general population and less access to routine health care. Targeted testing also would focus on people known to have drug habits or engage in high-risk sexual activities.

IV. Educate Medical Professionals

There are significant “pre-service” education and training needs for health care providers about how to initiate HIV testing, medical indications for HIV infection, how to deliver HIV diagnoses, and how to follow up and refer positive patients to care.

More focus is needed on educational programs for health care providers with the dual goals of: 1) Improving the care of people living with HIV and AIDS by increasing the number of health care providers who are able to diagnose and effectively connect to care patients with HIV infection; and 2) Decreasing HIV transmission by promoting risk reduction.

V. Refer HIV Positive Patients into Care as Quickly as Possible

Health care professionals who offer HIV tests should be prepared to play a role in helping newly diagnosed patients with HIV infection are linked to appropriate care. Ensuring HIV infected patients receive the care they need is similar to what clinicians already do to make referrals for other serious or chronic conditions, including:

- Researching and establishing relationships with local clinicians;
- Taking special care to understand the unique issues facing many newly diagnosed HIV infected patients; and
- Developing a referral processes that assures patients get the care they need.

Strong communication and collaboration is imperative among patients, individuals, clinicians, community-based organizations, and government organizations and an understanding of what each patient needs and sensitivity to the often unique issues facing each individual patient.

VI. Maximize the Benefits of Health Care Reform

Ensuring that providers can be reimbursed for HIV screening tests and HIV diagnostic tests will promote integration of HIV testing. Health care reform expands access to primary care and provides a reimbursement structure for routine screening. In addition, patients are connected to a “medical home” making it easier for institutions to be reimbursed for diagnostics, medication, and for doctors to provide follow up care and referrals to specialty care.

¹ Trends in Massachusetts HIV/AIDS by Year of Diagnosis of HIV Infection, October 1, 2008. HIV/AIDS Bureau. Massachusetts Department of Public Health. 250 Washington Street, Boston, MA.