



# ALEXANDRIA HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** The Honorable Mayor and Members of City Council

**FROM:** Stephen A. Haering, MD, MPH, FACPM, Director, Alexandria Health Department (AHD)

**DATE:** August 27, 2019

**SUBJECT:** Update Alexandria Health Department's Getting to Zero Alexandria Initiative:  
Zero New HIV Infections | Zero HIV Deaths | Zero Stigma

### Background

In December 2016, Alexandria had an HIV infection rate of 755.6 per 100,000 (people living with HIV), which was the highest in Northern Virginia and the fifth highest rate of persons living with HIV/AIDS in Virginia. Our number of new infections was 47, with a rate of 30.2 per 100,000. In response to the high rate of infection, the Alexandria Health Department (AHD) applied for Virginia Department of Health's (VDH) Early Intervention Services (EIS) grant funding to promote universal testing, reach out to high-risk groups in our community, link persons with HIV infection to care, and decrease stigma associated with HIV. AHD was awarded the grant in 2017, and successfully applied for an extension in 2018: the grant total was \$929,000 for 22 months.

The grant included outreach to persons living in the City and neighboring jurisdictions (neighboring health departments in Fairfax and Arlington did not apply for funding and allowed us to cross over into their bordering territory as we developed outreach plans targeted to men-who-have-sex-with-men (MSM) and other high-risk populations). Our initiative, "Getting to Zero Alexandria" (GTZ - Zero New Infections | Zero HIV Deaths | Zero Stigma), was developed to mitigate the gap in access to testing and linkages to ongoing care, especially within youth (13-25y/o), MSM, and immigrant communities with a focus on East Africa. The goals have been to expand access to HIV testing; to ensure linkages to treatment and supportive care services for those newly diagnosed with HIV infection; and to locate persons with HIV who have been lost to care and require re-linkage.

AHD started this initiative by making internal changes: 1) AHD adopted universal testing in all of its clinics, and 2) AHD started a HIV PrEP Program (PrEP = pre-exposure prophylaxis), in which high-risk patients are counseled on risk reduction strategies, initiated on medication that can stop the HIV virus from establishing a permanent infection, provided assistance with obtaining health insurance, and established with a medical home.

### Partnerships

A critical strategy AHD implemented to expand testing and expedite linkages to care was to collaborate with Alexandria's federally qualified community health center, Neighborhood Health (NH). With these funds, NH implemented opt-out testing (CDC's recommended Universal HIV Testing) for all of their new and existing patients between 13-64 years of age. The goal has been to identify those who may not know they are at risk for infection, may have been infected and do not

know it, and reduce the stigma of HIV and testing by offering it to everyone. NH has tested and educated thousands of patients who have either never been tested, or require more frequent testing based on behavioral risk factors.

AHD also reached out to the private medical community, as described next.

### **Private Medical Provider Education**

AHD conducted outreach to 16 Alexandria primary care medical practices and talked directly with two dozen clinicians. In depth public health detailing on the Getting to Zero Initiative was provided to these practices to emphasize universal HIV testing, in an effort to get their practices in alignment with CDC and US Preventive Services Task Force recommendations, and to help destigmatize HIV and testing in the community. AHD also gave information to medical providers about the AHD HIV PrEP Program and provided detailed information to them about how to initiate and monitor their high-risk patients on PrEP.

AHD also collaborated with Inova Juniper Services to provide two educational opportunities for private medical providers to promote universal HIV testing in their own practices. A third program is planned for the fall of 2019.

### **Outreach**

Getting to Zero (GTZ) utilizes outreach for community mobilization, education, and community-testing events. Expanded onsite testing during nontraditional hours has increased access to HIV testing at AHD's King Street facility and NH's Richmond Highway location. Adding free sexually transmitted infection (STI) screening increased the number of people tested. GTZ has also provided testing at colleges and universities, churches, homeless shelters/transitional housing, local gathering places frequented by MSM and/or Ethiopian communities, and at other community events, such as health fairs, concerts, neighborhood community days, and conferences. We have also offered special testing events for MSM, teens, and immigrant communities during national testing recognition days.

### **Marketing**

Health promotion is done through mass health education and area wide condom distribution. Getting to Zero has 25 condom bowls placed throughout Alexandria, Arlington, and Fairfax counties: in barbershops, clothing stores, Ethiopian markets/restaurants, and hookah bars. The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority has displayed GTZ placards on buses transiting Alexandria for the last six months. AHD has used Pandora music streaming campaign services to target persons most at risk for HIV infection. AHD has also utilized some social media outreach to encourage people, especially MSM, to visit our testing sites.

### **Allocation of funds**

The majority of the grant funding supports NH's efforts to provide Universal HIV Testing for all of their patients within CDC's guidelines: this enabled NH to hire a full-time grant manager to promote and provide testing; part-time support for data entry; and actual testing kits. The remainder of the funds pay for the AHD classified and temporary personnel that support the project, sponsoring community-testing events, purchasing supplies, conducting formal provider trainings, paid advertising, and staff development. In addition to AHD staff providing universal testing in all AHD clinics, staff supported by the grant include:

- Full-time Nurse Practitioner/Grant Manager – provides testing, treatment, counseling, and coordination and reporting of grant activities
- Full-time (temporary) Disease Intervention Specialist – provides linkage to care and follow-up of contacts to newly-diagnosed and patients lost-to-care
- Full-time (temporary) administrative support to maintain records, data entry, coordinate laboratory activities and also provides testing

- Two part-time (temporary) Outreach workers to do testing in the community and support in-house clinical activities
- Full-time grant manager/tester at NH
- Part-time administrative support to provide data entry into State system

### **Testing numbers**

The project is ongoing, and to date, we have reached thousands of people through our different initiatives. A total of 12,216 have been tested through July 2019 (detail below). We have demonstrated a 1% positivity rate, which is consistent with the national rate. Although, AHD funding will end in December 2019, NH has successfully applied for additional funding through the District of Columbia HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis, STD, and TB Administration (DC HAHSTA) to continue to offer universal testing to their patients. AHD has already incorporated many of the testing goals into our routine clinical care and is evaluating funding resources to continue to provide our successful expanded services (especially the additional HIV/STI clinics we started on Monday evenings and Saturday mornings) into the future. We also see value in our outreach and testing in the community and are hopeful that the work we have done will open doors to awareness and access and reduce stigma associated with testing in the past. Through our outreach initiatives, we provide services to some of those who would otherwise not access screening. We believe these services are vital to Getting to Zero.

Testing numbers detailed (through July):

- NH Universal testing – 7,235
- AHD GTZ high-risk outreach (MSM, Ethiopian, youth) – 1,447
- Other AHD testing – 3,534
- Positive patients linked to care – 9
- Contacts (to persons living with HIV) tested – 62

### **Current Status... and Continuing Steps to Getting to Zero**

The number of new HIV diagnoses in Alexandria has decreased to 28 in 2018 (first year of our initiative, most recent available data) for a rate of 16.2 per 100,000 (decreasing, but still the highest in NOVA). The overall rate of PLWH (People living with HIV) has decreased to 744.8 per 100,000 (but is still the highest in NOVA).

We, as the Health Department and a community, still have work to do to get to zero. The need to decrease stigma against testing and against those living with HIV still exists, as well as the need to continue to spread messages of risk reduction, prevention, and the importance of early detection to providers, and to the community. Alexandria Health Department intends to continue to lead these endeavors.

### **Staff**

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