



February 13, 2018

Progress in Reducing HIV

Last week, we recognized National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day with the theme, “Stay the Course, the Fight is Not Over!” Joining with my colleagues, interested parties and activists, we have been working on policies and enacting state laws over the last 11 years that have made it easier to test for HIV and to get the treatment that people who have HIV need.

I introduced landmark legislation in two different General Assemblies, both becoming law, which makes it easier and less intrusive for patients to be routinely tested for HIV in health care settings while preserving the rights of those being tested (Public Act 095-0007 in the 95th General Assembly and updated as Public Act 99-0054 in the 99th General Assembly). I also introduced legislation that became law to update state statutes so the most up to date supplemental testing is done to confirm a preliminary positive HIV test (Public Act 097-0244). Additional legislation that I introduced which became law made it so all CD-4 counts and HIV viral loads are reported to the Illinois Department of Public Health to improve the care of patients with HIV (Public Act 097-0550). I also introduced legislation that became law which protects the privacy of students who have HIV by repealing a 20 year old law which required public health departments to notify the principal if a student had HIV (Public Act 98-0353). Additionally, I introduced and passed House Resolution 0065 (96th GA) urging the Department of Public Health to establish a comprehensive plan to slow the spread of HIV/AIDS.

I was honored to receive the 2015 AIDS Foundation of Chicago Innovation Award for HIV Policy and Legislation, as a leader and organizer of the HIV Community Collaboration which promoted policies to advance HIV testing and treatment.

Has this work made a difference?

According to the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH), from 2000 to 2015, the rate of HIV infection among blacks decreased by 46 percent. However, as new HIV infections in Illinois plateaued in 2015, for every 100,000 black people in the state, 40 were still diagnosed with HIV (compared to 3.6 per 100,000 among whites) and more troubling, among young black gay men. Of the 224 deaths from HIV/AIDS in Illinois in 2015, 140 were among blacks.

According to the CDC in Atlanta, a national survey indicated that the percentage of blacks who had ever been tested increased from 57.0% during 2003–2006 to 64.0% during 2007–2010 and was highest among blacks during both periods when compared with other racial/ethnic groups.

Another important element to explain the decline in HIV is that now when people are found to have HIV, they are placed on meds right away at the time of diagnosis. By decreasing the HIV in their system, it decreases the chance that HIV would be transmitted to others. So, treatment IS prevention.

However, we still have a ways to go to decrease HIV in our communities. According to AIDSvu, 53% of people newly diagnosed with HIV in Chicago between 2011 and 2015 were black, 22% Hispanic/Latino, and 19% white. The rate of black males living with an HIV diagnosis in Chicago is 2.0 times that of white males. The rate of black females living with an HIV diagnosis in Chicago is 11.3 times that of white females. The numbers are decreasing, but 289 people diagnosed with HIV still died in 2015. We still have work to do.

What can we do? There are several strategies outlined by IDPH, and these strategies include:

1. Increasing statewide access to PrEP (Pre-exposure prophylaxis). PrEP is a way for people who do not have HIV to prevent HIV infection by taking a prescribed medication every day. www.PrEP4Illinois.com is a one-stop resource for education, access, and enrollment into PrEP services, regardless of ability to pay.
2. Promoting *Undetectable = Untransmittable*, which confirms the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's declaration that "people who take HIV medications daily as prescribed and achieve and maintain an undetectable viral load have effectively no risk of sexually transmitting their virus to an HIV-negative partner."
3. Ensuring those living with HIV and AIDS are in comprehensive, quality treatment, and receive the support they need to live healthy, quality lives.

Let's continue the fight against HIV and AIDS in our communities!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L. Ford', with a stylized flourish at the end.

La Shawn K. Ford
State Representative-Eighth District