

June 20, 2018

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**RE: Request for Information for the Development of the Fiscal Year 2021-2023 Trans-NIH Strategic Plan for HIV and HIV-Related Research, 83 FR 23471**

Dear Deputy Director Tabak,

The Fenway Institute works to make life healthier for those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT), as well as people living with HIV and the larger community. We do this through research and evaluation, education and training, and health policy analysis. We are the research division of Fenway Health, a federally qualified health center and Ryan White Part C HIV clinic in Boston, MA. We would like to make the following recommendations regarding the Fiscal Year 2021-2023 Trans-NIH Plan for HIV and HIV-Related Research relating to the five high priority topics of research listed in the RFI:

1. Reducing the incidence of HIV/AIDS
2. Developing the next generation of HIV therapies
3. Identifying strategies towards a cure
4. Improving the prevention and treatment of HIV-associated comorbidities, coinfections, and complications
5. Cross-cutting areas that include basic research, behavioral and social sciences research, health disparities, trainings, capacity-building, and infrastructure

*HIV Research Funding*

High priority research topics addressed: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

We would first like to emphasize the need for continued funding of HIV research in general. Between 2005 and 2014, new HIV diagnoses in the U.S. decreased by 19%.<sup>1</sup> With some populations hard hit by HIV, we saw even greater improvements: new diagnoses declined 42% among mostly heterosexual Black women over the past decade, fell 35% among heterosexual women and men of all races, and dropped 65% among people who inject drugs. Recent biobehavioral research breakthroughs, such as pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), are vital tools that could dramatically lower new HIV infections. It is important to continue to fund innovative HIV prevention research and keep this momentum going.

### *Biomedical Interventions for HIV Prevention*

High priority research topics addressed: 1, 2, 3

Given the major role PrEP is already playing in HIV prevention in the U.S.,<sup>2</sup> NIH should continue funding research into injectable PrEP, implants, transdermal patches, antibody-mediated prevention, and other long-lasting treatments as biobehavioral intervention approaches that could significantly increase adherence and efficacy. NIH should also continue funding research into vaginal and rectal microbicides, which have been shown to have potential.

Demonstration projects should be funded to understand real-world implementation issues and develop best practices. Among the most critical issues is how to improve rates of PrEP uptake among African Americans. Non-Hispanic Blacks were 45% of those newly diagnosed with HIV in 2013.<sup>3</sup> While about 80,000 individuals in the U.S. have accessed PrEP, its use among Black and Latino gay and bisexual men, youth, women, and Southerners has lagged.<sup>4</sup> Of 79,684 individuals on PrEP at the end of 2015 for whom race/ethnicity data were available, 74% were White, 10% Black, 12% Latino, and 4% Asian.<sup>5</sup> Implementation research to improve uptake of PrEP among Black gay and bisexual men, heterosexual women, and transgender women is urgently needed.

### *Research Studies Focused on Vulnerable Populations*

High priority research topics addressed: 1, 4, 5

NIH should fund research studies that focus specifically on populations that are disproportionately affected by the HIV epidemic, so that effective interventions to reduce these health disparities can be developed and implemented. Vulnerable populations that should be prioritized in HIV research include serodiscordant same-sex and opposite-sex partners, adolescent men who have sex with men (AMSM)—particularly YMSM of color, transgender people, people who inject drugs, and sex workers. Research studies should specifically target and include members of these vulnerable populations both as participants and as community partners in planning the research in order to ensure success. Studies of intermittent PrEP, non-tenofovir-based regimens, and non-oral modes of administration are important with these populations so that the safest, most cost-effective, and most acceptable regimens are available to a diverse array of potential consumers.

Transgender women have 49 times the odds of being infected with HIV compared with all adults of reproductive age.<sup>6</sup> This glaring disparity is even more apparent in transgender women of color.<sup>7</sup> Transgender people also experience widespread discrimination, including discrimination in health care settings, which contributes to lack of access to current HIV prevention methods such as PrEP. Previous large clinical studies of PrEP have only included a small percentage of transgender women within their study samples, despite the disproportionate burden of HIV on transgender women. Because of this, there is a strong need for more research in the area of PrEP and other HIV prevention interventions for transgender women. Also, there is concern among some transgender women that estrogen therapy could interfere with the effectiveness of PrEP.<sup>8</sup> While leading transgender health and PrEP researchers do not think there are interactions between PrEP and feminizing hormones<sup>9,10</sup> intentional,

focused research on interactions between antiretroviral medications and cross-sex hormone therapy would clarify whether there is any interaction between the two classes of drugs.<sup>11</sup>

There is even less research available on HIV burden among transgender men or non-binary/gender nonconforming individuals. NIH should fund more research that intentionally focuses on and emphasizes the needs and experiences of transgender people, and also makes distinctions within the transgender community rather than aggregating all transgender people into one category. In the United States (US), young men who have sex with men (MSM) are at especially high risk for infection with HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STI). HIV disproportionately burdens adolescent MSM (AMSM), especially those who are Black and Latino, as compared to heterosexual youth.<sup>12</sup> While HIV diagnoses have declined among many groups of adults since 2005, the same declines have not been observed among AMSM.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, HIV incidence is on the rise among Black and Latino youth; new infections among 13-24 year old Black and Latino MSM rose by 87% between 2005 and 2014.<sup>14</sup> NIH should fund research to develop more effective approaches to promote health and well-being and reduce HIV infection among youth, and in particular among AMSM of color.

Research on structural drivers of vulnerability to HIV is needed. Structural factors that can increase can increase vulnerability to HIV and decrease access to care include intimate partner violence,<sup>15</sup> criminalization of sex work,<sup>16</sup> gender-based violence,<sup>17</sup> and victimization in childhood<sup>18</sup> and adulthood.<sup>19</sup>

#### *Chronic disease and disability among older people living with HIV*

High priority research topics addressed: 4, 5

As people living with HIV live into middle age and older adulthood thanks to improvements in treatment and care, more research on health issues affecting older people living with HIV is needed. About half of the HIV-positive population in the United States is now age 50 or older.<sup>20</sup> Older adults living with HIV are more likely to have comorbidities than other older adults.<sup>21</sup> As people grow older with HIV, their ability to metabolize antiretroviral medications is diminished, resulting in increased toxicity.<sup>22</sup> Taking antiretrovirals for a long time may increase the risk of heart attack<sup>23</sup> and heart disease.<sup>24</sup> HIV infection and antiretroviral therapy are associated with obesity,<sup>25</sup> which presents additional risk factors for heart disease.<sup>26</sup> Preexisting cardiovascular, hepatic, and metabolic complications can be exacerbated by HIV infection itself, immunodeficiency, and by metabolic syndrome and other adverse effects of antiretroviral therapy.<sup>27</sup> Research into disability and chronic disease issues affecting long-term survivors of HIV living into old age and other older adults living with HIV is needed.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention should improve epidemiological surveillance systems and data collection on older adults delineated by age and risk category to better inform HIV preventionists and gerontological health providers with information on the proportion of older HIV-positive adults who contract HIV through homosexual sex, heterosexual

sex, and injection drug use. It should also analyze HIV prevalence among the young-old, old-old, and oldest-old.

The National Institutes of Health should fund large-scale, national, longitudinal studies that investigate how antiretroviral medications and HIV disease interact with aging bodies, and how they interact with treatments for comorbidities such as high cholesterol medication; to what extent normal aging processes result from viral infection and immune activation; and the incidence and determinants of cognitive decline in aging HIV-positive individuals.

A 2009 Kaiser Family Foundation survey found that more than one third of Americans believed that HIV could be transmitted by sharing a drinking glass, touching a toilet seat, or sharing a swimming pool with an HIV-positive person.<sup>28</sup> Older Americans are more likely than members of younger age cohorts to hold inaccurate beliefs about the casual transmission of HIV.<sup>29</sup> Older Americans are also more likely to hold anti-gay views than younger age cohorts.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, many LGBT older adults express concern about how they will be treated in mainstream senior settings.<sup>31</sup> Research should be conducted to study the experiences of HIV-positive elders, older gay and bisexual men, and transgender women in senior service settings, including congregate living facilities, to inform services and best practices to ensure that they can access elder services.

#### *Research That Analyzes Clinical Data to Improve Care for People Living with HIV*

High priority research topics addressed: 4, 5

The CFAR Network of Integrated Clinical Systems (CNICS) is a research infrastructure that supports HIV clinical outcomes and comparative effectiveness research using electronic medical records data from 8 Centers for AIDS Research (CFARs). As of 2017, CNICS contains data on 32,727 individuals living with HIV. CNICS data directly reflects the health outcomes of HIV treatment options and clinical decisions made every day in the care of people living with HIV. This data is immensely useful in developing effective HIV care management protocol. CNICS data has significantly contributed to new clinical, translational, and biobehavioral HIV research, with 230 peer-reviewed PubMed publications citing CNICS data as of May 2017. Another example is the North American AIDS Cohort Collaboration on Research and Design (NA-ACCORD). Some 200 clinical sites contribute data on 157,701 HIV-infected patients. Research focused on epidemiology, treatment and clinical care has been published in 51 peer-reviewed publications and presented at many dozens of professional research conferences. The 2012 Institute of Medicine report *Monitoring HIV Care in the United States: A Strategy for Generating National Estimates of HIV Care and Coverage* cites CNICS and NA-ACCORD as critically important data sets on clinical health outcomes for people living with HIV.<sup>32</sup> We encourage NIH to continue to fund multisite clinical outcomes research on HIV treatment and clinical care.

We thank you for this opportunity to provide feedback on the FY 2021-2023 Trans-NIH Plan for HIV and HIV-Related Research. Should you have any questions or require more information on any of the suggestions made here,

please contact Sean Cahill, PhD, Director of Health Policy Research at [scahill@fenwayhealth.org](mailto:scahill@fenwayhealth.org) or Tim Wang, MPH, Health Policy Analyst at [twang@fenwayhealth.org](mailto:twang@fenwayhealth.org).

Sincerely,  
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<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. HIV diagnoses decline almost 20 percent, but progress is uneven. Press release, December 6, 2015. <https://aidsinfo.nih.gov/news/1631/hiv-diagnoses-decline-almost-20-percent-but-progress-is-uneven>

<sup>2</sup> Anonymous (2016, July 21). U.S. PrEP users likely exceeded 80,000 by end of 2015. *Poz*. <https://www.poz.com/article/us-prep-use-likely-80000-end-2015>

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<sup>5</sup> Presentation by Alex Rinehart, PhD, Director, Global Prevention Strategy, ViiV Healthcare, ViiV Community Summit, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, November 12, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Baral, S. D., Poteat, T., Stromdahl, S., Wirtz, A. L., Guadamuz, T. E., & Beyrer, C. Worldwide burden of HIV in transgender women: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*. 2013. 13, 214–222. doi:10.1016/S1473-3099(12)70315-8

<sup>7</sup> The Foundation for AIDS Research. *Trans population and HIV: Time to end the neglect*. 2014. Accessed at: <http://www.amfar.org/issue-brief-trans-populations-and-hiv-time-to-end-the-neglect/>

<sup>8</sup> Marquez S, Cahill S (2015, December 1). *Transgender women and pre-exposure prophylaxis for HIV prevention: What we know and what we still need to know*. National Center for Innovation in HIV Care.

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