

# END THE EPIDEMICS

Californians Mobilizing to End HIV, HCV, and STDs

*Community Consensus Statement*

April 18, 2019

**We, the undersigned organizations, call on Governor Newsom and the California Legislature to act now to end the HIV, HCV, and STD epidemics.**

**THE OPPORTUNITY:** California is at an unprecedented moment in response to HIV, hepatitis C (HCV), and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). With highly effective treatments and proven prevention tools, California can now dramatically reduce new transmissions, improve the health of people living with these conditions, and bring these epidemics to an end.

**THE CHALLENGE:** Over 5,000 Californians are newly diagnosed with HIV each year—more than any other state in the nation—and over 400,000 California residents are currently living with HCV.<sup>1</sup> STD cases reached a record high for the third year in a row, with more Californians being diagnosed with chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis in 2017 than ever before.<sup>2</sup>

HIV, HCV, and STDs are interrelated epidemics—also known as a syndemic—impacting many of California's most disadvantaged communities, including people of color, gay and bisexual men, transgender individuals, women, people experiencing homelessness, youth, and people who use drugs. Bold action is needed to integrate our response to these epidemics and eliminate health disparities and inequities.

**THE SOLUTION:** Ending these epidemics will require renewed commitment from elected officials and strategic new investments in effective education, prevention, and treatment programs. It will also require structural responses to address the economic and social conditions that drive these epidemics, including stigma and discrimination, poverty, and unstable housing. Failure to act decisively will only result in more transmissions and significantly higher public and private health care costs.

On April 10, 2018, a group of 50 public health and community leaders convened in Los Angeles to build support for a statewide strategy to end the HIV, HCV, and STD epidemics.<sup>3</sup> The convening was informed by other recent statewide efforts, including California's Integrated HIV Surveillance, Prevention, and Care Plan and Viral Hepatitis Prevention Strategic Plan.<sup>4</sup> While these plans outline important goals and recommendations, they do not adequately speak to the need for broad-based community engagement or the political will, resources, and cross-departmental collaboration that will be required to address these epidemics effectively.

California's strategy will only work if it is endorsed by the state's Governor and Legislature and brings all relevant stakeholders to the table—including government and public health officials, health care and social service providers, researchers, the private and nonprofit sectors, and individuals most impacted by these health conditions. Governor Newsom showed bold leadership during his campaign by committing to a statewide initiative to end the HIV and HCV epidemics. We look forward to working with him to fulfill that commitment and urge his administration to address California's alarming STD epidemic as part of this effort.

**Governor Newsom and the California Legislature can launch this important public health effort now, by convening a high-level working group of key stakeholders to develop and implement a strategy to end the HIV, HCV, and STD epidemics.** With ambitious political will, increased resources, and improved collaboration among all stakeholders, we can end these epidemics once and for all.

**THE EPIDEMICS:** HIV, HCV, and STDs are among the most serious public health issues in California:

- Over 151,000 Californians are now living with HIV. Roughly 13 percent of these individuals are unaware of their HIV status and nearly half (46 percent) lack consistent care or access to treatment.<sup>5</sup> California now has the highest annual number of new HIV diagnoses in the United States, with over 5,000 individuals newly diagnosed each year.<sup>6</sup>
- Over 400,000 Californians are currently living with HCV. Most do not know it.<sup>7</sup> Nearly 34,000 new cases of chronic HCV were reported in 2015.<sup>8</sup> The cost of HCV-related hospitalizations in California rose over 32 percent (from \$2.7 billion to \$3.6 billion) between 2006 and 2012.<sup>9</sup> The opioid crisis has led to dramatic increases in HCV and increased vulnerability to HIV outbreaks in rural parts of the state.<sup>10</sup>
- There were more than 300,000 reported STD cases in California in 2017, a 45 percent increase since 2013.<sup>11</sup> California ranks first among all states for the total number of cases of chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis.<sup>12</sup> Cases of congenital syphilis have also increased rapidly in recent years, from 33 in 2012 to 283 in 2017, with California leading the country in reported cases.<sup>13</sup>

**THE SYNDemic:** HIV, HCV, and STDs together create a syndemic—a set of linked health problems that interact synergistically and exacerbate poor health outcomes. For example, having an STD increases the likelihood of acquiring HIV.<sup>14</sup> Among people who are living with HCV and HIV, HCV progresses faster and more than triples the risk for liver disease, liver failure, and liver-related death.<sup>15</sup> These epidemics are also driven by similar social and economic conditions and disproportionately impact many of the same disadvantaged communities:

- **Gay and bisexual men** are at increased risk for both HIV and STDs, accounting for roughly three-quarters of HIV and early syphilis cases.<sup>16</sup> Around a quarter of **transgender women**, and more than half of **black transgender women**, are estimated to be living with HIV.<sup>17</sup>
- **People of color** are highly affected by HIV, HCV, and STDs. **Blacks** have rates of new HIV diagnoses, chlamydia, and gonorrhea that are nearly five times those of whites.<sup>18</sup> And while blacks are just under 6 percent of the population in California, they account for nearly twelve percent of HCV cases.<sup>19</sup> Rates of new HIV diagnoses among **Latinx individuals** are nearly double those of whites.<sup>20</sup>
- **Young people** have seen increasing rates of HIV, HCV, and STDs in recent years. Rates of newly reported chronic HCV increased 50 percent among young people (15-29 years) from 2011-2015, likely due to increases in injection drug use.<sup>21</sup> Over half of reported chlamydia cases in 2016 were among persons under 25 years of age. **People who use drugs** are at increased risk for both HIV and HCV.<sup>22</sup>
- **Women** in California are increasingly at risk for STDs and HCV. Rates of early syphilis and HCV among women of childbearing age (15-44 years) increased 450 and 148 percent, respectively, from 2012-2016.<sup>23</sup> Syphilis, when transmitted from mother to baby, can cause premature birth, birth defects, and even death.<sup>24</sup> The number of infants born with congenital syphilis in California has increased for five years in a row.<sup>25</sup>

**THE TOOLS:** Despite California's concerning trends, we now have powerful tools to bring these epidemics to an end:

- Highly effective medications lengthen and improve the quality of life for people living with HIV.<sup>26</sup> People living with HIV who are virally suppressed, the goal of treatment, cannot transmit HIV to their partners.<sup>27</sup>
- HIV-negative individuals can now take preventive medications—known as pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP)—to nearly eliminate their risk of acquiring HIV.<sup>28</sup>
- Powerful new HCV drugs can cure the vast majority of people in as little as eight to twelve weeks and prevent further transmission.<sup>29</sup>
- Most STDs are curable, and efficient STD screening, rapid treatment, and enhanced partner services can dramatically reduce their further spread and debilitating side effects.<sup>30</sup>
- Comprehensive prevention services can drastically reduce new HIV, HCV, and STD transmissions. These services include health education and condom distribution, testing, linkage to treatment and/or PrEP, hepatitis A and B vaccination, and navigation to substance use and mental health services.
- Harm reduction services—including syringe exchange, medication assisted therapy, and safe injection sites—can also significantly reduce transmission of HIV and HCV.<sup>31</sup>

**THE STRATEGY:** California has built a strong foundation to end these epidemics. The state's aggressive implementation of the Affordable Care Act cut the uninsured rate by over half, from 17.2 percent in 2013 to 7.2 percent in 2017, the largest decline in uninsured in the nation.<sup>32</sup> Increased access to affordable health coverage makes it possible for more people living with and at risk for these conditions to access critical prevention services and lifesaving treatment.

To end these epidemics, we must accelerate our progress in ensuring access to culturally competent, quality health care for all Californians. We must fully implement and bring to scale effective tools with the goal of eliminating health disparities and inequities. This will require strategic, well-integrated planning and allocation of additional resources to support proven outreach and education, prevention, and treatment programs.

Quality health care and prevention services alone, however, will not be enough to end these epidemics. Recognizing the impact of social determinants of health—including stigma, racism, xenophobia, homophobia and transphobia, poverty, and homelessness—and identifying structural approaches to address them will be crucial.

Effectively addressing the HIV, HCV, and STD syndemic will require an integrated approach and enhanced collaboration among community stakeholders and all relevant state agencies, including the Department of Public Health, Department of Health Care Services, Covered California, Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, Department of Consumer Affairs, and Department of Education. Individuals and communities most impacted by these conditions must also be involved in the leadership, planning, and decision-making at every level.

**THE GOALS:** Over the past several months, public health and community leaders have come together and formed a coalition—End the Epidemics: Californians Mobilizing to End HIV, HCV, and STDs—to urge elected officials to take action and implement a statewide strategy to end the HIV, HCV, and STD epidemics. The coalition has developed six goals for the strategy that should be weighed and advanced during a formal statewide working group process. Specific recommendations for each of these goals will be shared in the coming months:

- Increase the number of people living with HIV, HCV, and STDs who are aware of their status;
- Increase access to comprehensive HIV, HCV, and STD prevention services;
- Ensure linkage to and retention in culturally competent, quality health care for everyone living with and vulnerable to HIV, HCV, and STDs;
- Increase training and capacity building to strengthen and integrate the HIV, HCV and STD provider workforce;
- Address social determinants of health that impact people living with at increased risk for HIV, HCV, and STDs;
- Develop and track metrics to assess progress toward ending the HIV, HCV, and STD epidemics.

Visionary leadership, strategic planning, and targeted new resources will be required to achieve these goals. **We respectfully ask Governor Newsom and the California Legislature to empower a working group of key stakeholders as soon as possible to initiate and implement California’s strategy to end the HIV, HCV, and STD epidemics.** We look forward to working together to improve the health of all Californians.

Access Support Network  
ACCESS Women’s Health Justice  
ACLU of California  
AIDS 2020 Local Planning Group  
AIDS Legal Referral Panel  
AIDS Project of the East Bay (APEB)  
Alliance for Housing and Healing  
American Liver Foundation, Pacific Coast Division  
Any Positive Change, Inc.  
APAIT- Special Service for Groups  
APLA Health  
ArchBishop Carl Bean Legacy Center  
Avielle Foundation  
Berkeley Free Clinic  
Bienestar Human Services, Inc.  
Black AIDS Institute  
Black Women for Wellness  
The Bridging Group  
Business and Professional Women of Nevada County  
California Hepatitis Alliance (CalHEP)  
California HIV Alliance

California LGBTQ Health and Human Services Network  
California National Organization for Women  
California Pan-Ethnic Health Network (CPEHN)  
California Prevention Training Center  
California School-Based Health Alliance  
CaliforniaHealth+ Advocates  
Center for AIDS Prevention Studies (CAPS)  
Center for HIV Identification, Prevention, and Treatment Services (CHIPTS)  
Center for the Study of Racism, Social Justice & Health, UCLA Fielding School of Public Health  
Center for Health Justice, Inc.  
The Center on Reproductive Rights & Justice  
Centerforce  
CenterLink: The Community of LGBT Centers  
Children's Hospital Los Angeles, Division of Adolescent and Young Adult Medicine  
Christie's Place  
Citizens for Choice  
City of Refuge, UCC  
Coachman Moore & Associates Inc.  
Community Clinic Association of Los Angeles County  
Community Health Association Inland Southern Region  
Community Medical Centers, Inc.  
Congress of California Seniors  
C.O.R.E. Medical Clinic, Inc.  
Desert AIDS Project  
Diversity Collective  
Drew Center for AIDS Research Education and Services, Charles Drew University  
Drug Policy Alliance  
East Bay Getting to Zero  
East Los Angeles Women's Center  
End Hep C LA  
End Hep C SF  
Equality California  
Essential Access Health  
Face to Face/Sonoma County AIDS Network  
Family Health Centers of San Diego  
Free Speech Coalition  
Fresno Needle Exchange  
Friends Research Institute  
Gay and Lesbian Alliance of the Central Coast  
Gender Health Center  
Getting to Zero San Francisco  
GLIDE HIV/Hep C Prevention Services & Harm Reduction Programs  
Global Liver Alliance  
Golden Rule Services  
Harm Reduction Coalition  
Harm Reduction Services  
HCV Advocate  
Health Connected  
Hepatitis C Task Force for Los Angeles County  
HepCarestream: The Nurse Is In  
HIV Education and Prevention Project of Alameda County

HIV Health Services, San Francisco Department of Public Health  
HIVE  
Humboldt Area Center for Harm Reduction (HACHR)  
International Association of Providers of AIDS Care (IAPAC)  
Invisible Men  
JWCH Institute, Inc.  
LA CADA Art House  
LASH (Local Area Support for Hepatitis)  
Latino Coalition for a Healthy California  
LGBT Community Center of the Desert  
The LGBTQ Center Long Beach  
Long Beach Department of Health and Mental Services  
Long Beach Mental Health Center  
The Los Angeles Christian Health Centers  
Los Angeles Community Health Center  
Los Angeles County Commission on HIV  
Los Angeles County Department of Public Health  
Los Angeles County Department of Public Health/Acute Communicable Disease Control Program  
Los Angeles County Department of Public Health Division of HIV & STD Programs  
Los Angeles LGBT Center  
The Los Angeles Trust for Children's Health  
Men's Health Foundation  
Mendocino County AIDS/Viral Hepatitis Network  
National Health Law Program  
NARAL Pro-Choice California  
Northeast Valley Health Corporation  
Oakland TGA  
Pacific AIDS Education & Training Center  
Planned Parenthood Affiliates of California  
PleasePrEPMe  
Positive Women's Network - USA  
POZabilities  
PRC  
Project Inform  
Public Health Institute  
Public Law Center  
Queer LifeSpace  
Radiant Health Centers  
REACH LA  
Roots Community Health Center  
Sacramento Area S.T.O.P. Hepatitis Task-Force  
Sacramento County Department of Health Services  
Sacramento LGBT Community Center  
San Francisco AIDS Foundation  
San Francisco Community Health Center  
San Francisco Drug Users Union  
San Francisco EMA HIV Community Planning Council  
San Francisco Hepatitis C Task Force  
San Francisco Safety and Wellness Coalition  
Sierra Foothills AIDS Foundation  
Sisters United Now (SUN) STI Network

SLO Bangers Syringe Exchange and Overdose Prevention Program  
Solano Pride Center  
South Bay LGBTQ Alliance  
St. James Infirmary  
St. John's Well Child and Family Center  
The Source LGBT+ Center  
The Spahr Center  
Transgender Law Center  
Transitions Clinic Network  
TransLatin@ Coalition  
TruEvolution, Inc.  
UCLA Bixby Program in Population and Reproductive Health  
UCLA TKSL  
UCSF Alliance Health Project  
Unity Fellowship Social Justice Ministries  
Valley Community Healthcare  
The Wall Las Memorias Project  
United States People Living with HIV Caucus  
Valley Community Healthcare  
Vista Community Clinic  
W King Health Care Group  
WeCanStopSTDsLA  
West County Health Centers Homeless Services  
Western Center on Law and Poverty  
Women's Foundation of California

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<sup>1</sup> California Department of Public Health, Office of AIDS, California HIV Surveillance Report — 2016. Available at: <https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DOA/CDPH%20Document%20Library/California%20HIV%20Surveillance%20Report%20-%202016.pdf>.

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<sup>2</sup> California Department of Public Health, STD Control Branch: Sexually transmitted diseases in California, 2017 Snapshot. Available at: <https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/CDPH%20Document%20Library/STDs-CA-2017Snapshot.pdf>.

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<sup>4</sup> Laying a Foundation for Getting to Zero: California's Integrated HIV Surveillance, Prevention, and Care Plan. Published September 2016. Available at: [https://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/CID/DOA/CDPH%20Document%20Library/IP\\_2016\\_Final.pdf](https://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/CID/DOA/CDPH%20Document%20Library/IP_2016_Final.pdf).

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>13</sup> California Department of Public Health, STD Control Branch: Sexually transmitted diseases in California, 2017 Snapshot. Available at: <https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/CDPH%20Document%20Library/STDs-CA-2017Snapshot.pdf>.

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