

HIV Research Study Update

Recommendations for Providing Health Care Services to People Living with HIV within the Alaska Tribal Health System (ATHS)



The Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC) conducted this study from June to December 2022. We extend our sincere gratitude to all participants, as well as to the Early Intervention Consumer Advisory Board for their valuable input and constructive feedback.

Why?

This study set out to capture the lived experiences of Alaska Native and American Indian individuals living with HIV who receive care within the tribal health system, as well as to gather insights from health care staff providing these services. The primary aim was to generate actionable recommendations to foster a safer and more supportive environment for AN/AI people living with HIV. To achieve this, researchers conducted two separate surveys: one for AN/AI individuals living with HIV, and another designed for health care facility staff and providers.

What We Found

Forty-eight people living with HIV participated, either in person or over the phone. The results are in line with existing research—people living with HIV are still facing significant challenges. Stigma, discrimination, mental health concerns, and health care-related issues all remain concerns.

That said, there are some positives worth noting. Most respondents are receiving antiviral treatment, and around 80% achieved viral suppression or undetectable levels in the past year. Participants also showed a strong sense of resilience and continued to advocate for the rights and well-being of others living with HIV.

The study also engaged 195 health care providers across the Alaska Tribal Health System (ATHS). Providers were surveyed about their knowledge, attitudes, and practices regarding HIV. While most demonstrated a generally positive outlook, there are still noticeable barriers related to attitudes, best practices, and existing policies. These issues can inadvertently contribute to stigmatizing care.

The results point to a clear need for focused training and policy improvements to ensure a safer, more supportive health care environment for Alaska Native and American Indian individuals living with HIV within the ATHS.



ALASKA NATIVE
TRIBAL HEALTH
CONSORTIUM

Recommendations

(1) Education and training:

- Enhance healthcare workforce training with a clear focus on inclusivity for quality care.
- Providers need stronger education on sexual health, HIV, and STIs, so they can confidently address sensitive topics with patients.
- All healthcare workers should receive robust education on harm reduction principles.
- Training in HIV-appropriate universal precautions is needed, ensuring providers are up to date on best practices.
- Ongoing reinforcement of privacy training is critical.
- Providers should be up to date on CDC guidelines and best practices for HIV testing, so patients get the right care every time.
- Normalize HIV testing and PrEP access as part of standard care—providers should be trained to offer these routinely, not just occasionally.
- Expand training on 2SLGBTQ+ inclusive language and communication, ensuring every patient is respected and understood.

(2) Policies:

- Review existing HIV testing procedures to ensure they follow CDC best practices.
- Ensure customer-owners are clearly informed about being tested for HIV.
- If there are no established guidelines, develop policies that meet national standards.
- Create and implement policies that foster an inclusive environment.
- Provide staff with training on these policies and ensure they're easily accessible to both healthcare workers and individuals living with HIV.

(3) Inclusivity and respect campaigns:

- Develop targeted messaging for healthcare professionals that clearly communicate the U=U message (Undetectable = Untransmissible), aiming to reduce unnecessary precautions and ensure evidence-based care for individuals living with HIV.
- Launch well-crafted, inclusive U=U campaigns for the broader public, highlighting accurate information about HIV transmission and emphasizing that people living with HIV can enjoy long, productive lives.
- Promote routine HIV testing by showcasing a range of available options, such as self-testing, clinic-based services, and community-based approaches, making testing accessible and approachable for everyone.
- Ensure that inclusivity and respect are at the forefront of providing care, with specific focus on addressing the complex and intersecting stigmas related to sexual orientation, gender identity, drug use, and sex work.

(4) Engaging and supporting people living with HIV:

- People living with HIV need clear education about their privacy rights, how their records are protected, and when disclosure is required within ATHS services. Empowerment starts with information.
- Facilitate seamless connections between HIV care, general health services, mental health resources, and social support programs to support easy navigation of available services.
- Provide greater access to secure and supportive networking groups and spaces that are safe and welcoming.
- Tailor services to support people in making informed lifestyle choices. Empowerment and confidence in these decisions are key.