

## **Amida Care wants to offer Medicaid coverage to HIV-negative men**

By Nick Niedzwiadek

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ALBANY — Amida Care is asking the state for permission to offer a specialized Medicaid plan to men who have sex with men, particularly African-Americans and Latinos, in an attempt to drive down new HIV infections in New York City.

Amida Care, which specializes in health plans for people with special health needs or chronic conditions like HIV/AIDS, wants to be able to insure gay and bisexual men who are not HIV-positive. Officials say that existing health plans do not always have the same level of expertise in caring for these men, and that some insurers have erected unnecessary barriers to accessing pre-exposure prophylaxis, or PrEP, which guards against HIV transmission.

"Our intention is to really support them in getting access to PrEP and staying HIV negative to get about the business of living their lives, going to school, getting jobs and being productive members of the community," Doug Wirth, president and CEO, said in an interview. "We're prepared to roll up our sleeves and work beside state government officials to figure it out."

Amida Care, along with dozens of allied community health organizations, sent a letter to the heads of the Department of Health's Medicaid program and AIDS Institute asking for permission to offer HIV Special Needs Plans to HIV-negative men who have sex with men. Their hope is to begin offering such plans by April 2019.

"These services, in combination with continued care provision to HIV-positive members, will help to significantly reduce new infections in the MSM population," the letter [dated](#) July 12 states. "The additional comprehensive care coordination services that HSNPs are equipped to provide to eligible populations, such as HIV prevention education and treatment adherence assistance, will help HIV negative MSM Medicaid recipients get healthier and stay healthier by preventing new infections."

Across the state there were [2,115 new HIV infections](#) in 2016, down from 2,436 in 2015 but slightly behind the target of 2,050, according to Department of Health data. New York is working to get that figure down to 750 by 2020 as part of an [ambitious plan](#) by Gov. Andrew Cuomo to end the epidemic.

In New York City, gay and bisexual men account for the vast majority of new HIV diagnoses. Black and Latino men who have sex with men are among the groups most at risk for HIV infection, and Amida Care believes it would be in the best position to get those who are Medicaid-eligible access to PrEP and prevent spread of the virus.

The insurer, which operates in the five boroughs of New York City, got permission from the state in November, 2017, to enroll transgender individuals regardless of their HIV status. Amida Care now insures about 500 transgender individuals.

Wirth said it took about 16 months of work with the state to design the protocols for covering these people, but he's hoping that it will serve as a blueprint for this new proposal and expedite the process.

If approved, Wirth estimates that more than 50,000 New York City residents would qualify for the new health plan, but doesn't expect much pushback from other Medicaid managed care plan providers worried about losing members.

"For some health plans that know little about HIV, they may even be happy to see their members switch to a plan that understands these health needs and has a track record of effectively doing so," he said.

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