



For Immediate Release

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Amida Care Releases Policy Brief on How the Pandemic Has Affected New York's Effort to End the HIV Epidemic

Policy Brief Released in Conjunction with an Online Panel Discussion featuring Johanne Morne, Director of the NYS Department of Health AIDS Institute, Dr. Anisha Gandhi of the NYC Health Department and Other Health and Policy Experts

To view a copy of “A Pandemic and an Epidemic: COVID-19 and Ending HIV in New York,” click [here](#)

New York, NY (October 23, 2020) – Yesterday, Amida Care, New York's largest nonprofit Medicaid Special Needs Health Plan (SNP) designed for New Yorkers affected by HIV, released a policy brief on how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted New York's effort to end the HIV epidemic. “[A Pandemic and an Epidemic: COVID-19 and Ending HIV in New York](#)” outlines recommendations for public health agencies, health plans and providers, and all New Yorkers on ways to increase PrEP uptake, strengthen Medicaid, and break down barriers to access for HIV prevention and treatment.

The policy brief was released in conjunction with an online panel discussion co-hosted by Amida Care and *Gay City News*. Experts discussed how the pandemic has affected efforts to expand PrEP uptake and provide access to HIV testing and treatment, in the lead-up to the New York State AIDS Institute's annual [PrEP Aware Week \(Oct. 25-31\)](#). Paul Schindler, editor-in-chief of *Gay City News*, moderated the panel discussion.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has presented great challenges to the health of New Yorkers, and HIV-related health care is no exception,” said Doug Wirth, President and CEO of Amida Care. “But the pandemic has also presented us with a number of learning opportunities. This report outlines ways that we can think creatively, act strategically, and promote health equity and accessibility to ensure that we help New York realize an HIV-free future.”

New York State was making steady progress towards its goal of Ending the HIV Epidemic by 2020, but COVID-19 has presented challenges to health care across the board, and the effects are far-reaching. In an effort to maintain the momentum towards an HIV-free future, the report *A Pandemic and an Epidemic: COVID-19 and Ending HIV in New York* makes a number of

recommendations for government, health plans, providers, and individuals. These include, but are not limited to:

- Focus education, prevention, and treatment efforts on communities placed at elevated risk for HIV, including Black and Latinx communities, communities experiencing systemic oppressors (including food insecurity and housing instability), people of transgender experience, and people with a history of injection drug use.
- Strengthen access to Medicaid, and ensure that Medicaid enrollees are aware that PrEP is available to them.
- Implement a quality measure for health plans to track progress towards HIV goals.
- Improve access to sexual health services including HIV tests and PrEP discussion upon STI diagnosis.
- Support immediate initiation of antiretroviral therapy (iART), which is shown to improve viral suppression and increase retention in care.
- Implement cultural competency training and care for all staff in health care settings, including non-clinical staff.

“We know we are on pace to bend the curve--the point where we have achieved fewer HIV infections than deaths among persons with diagnosed HIV...And there were nearly 32,000 individuals who filled PrEP prescriptions in New York State in 2018...Today, we will discuss how to move forward with ending the epidemic, how we take the lessons learned from responding to HIV in New York State for the last three plus decades, and how we apply that towards ending the pandemic as well,” said Johanne Morne, Director, New York State Department of Health AIDS Institute.

“This is not just a government effort, this is a deep community effort as well, and we cannot get to our Ending the Epidemic goals without this really broad, cross-sector collaboration and partnership. We are very much indebted to community partners, stakeholders, and activists to keep us pushing toward our goals,” said Dr. Anisha Gandhi, Acting Assistant Commissioner, Bureau of HIV, NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

“Our goal and our desire should not be to go back to health care as it was in January or February. We should be utilizing everything that we have learned since the beginning of this pandemic, and moving forward with a new method, modality, and style of health care,” said Dr. David Collymore, Chief Medical Officer and Senior Vice President of Clinical Affairs, Acacia Network.

“There are a myriad of issues that create hurdles for people to get onto PrEP. As a community organizer for New Pride Agenda...we do work in education advocacy, partnering with health service providers and LGBTQ service providers to amplify education around PrEP,” said Ahmed Mohamed, Civic Engagement and Community Organizer for NEW Pride Agenda and PrEP consumer. “Amplifying PrEP on the providers’ side does wonders in terms of getting people to think about whether they are a good candidate for PrEP.”

“There are many reasons why trans and gender-diverse people are not accessing PrEP...On a community level...many [transgender individuals] are not aware of PrEP, and when they are aware, they are often concerned about drug-on-drug interactions. The main concern is, if they

take PrEP, it will negatively impact hormones and that they will not get the full masculinizing or feminizing effects. We can absolutely say that's not the case. All the studies have shown that PrEP does not interfere whatsoever with how the hormones work," said Dr. Asa Radix, Senior Director of Research and Education, Callen-Lorde Community Health Center.

A main point of focus throughout the panel discussion was the importance of an intentional equity-focused approach toward Ending the Epidemic--that public agencies, health care, and community approaches must be intersectional and anti-stigma, mitigating racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and other systems of oppression present in society.

To view a copy of "*A Pandemic and an Epidemic: COVID-19 and Ending HIV in New York*," [click here](#).

Amida Care Inc. is a not-for-profit health plan that specializes in providing comprehensive health coverage and coordinated care to New Yorkers with complex conditions, including HIV and behavioral health disorders, and people who are of transgender experience or homeless (regardless of HIV status). Amida Care has a wide network of health care providers throughout New York City and is the largest Medicaid Special Needs Health Plan (SNP) in New York State. For more information, visit www.amidacareny.org.