



For Immediate Release

Media Contact: Shakira Croce, Assistant Director of Communications
scroce@amidacareny.org, (917)-565-4444

Virtual Event Explores COVID-19's Impact on Ending the HIV Epidemic in New York State

Webinar featured Johanne Morne, Director of the NYS Department of Health AIDS Institute, Dr. Anisha Gandhi of the NYC Health Department, Community Health Providers and Other Policy Experts

New York, NY (October 27, 2020) – On Thursday, October 22, Amida Care, New York’s largest nonprofit Medicaid Special Needs Health Plan (SNP) designed for New Yorkers affected by HIV, co-hosted a webinar with *Gay City News*, where expert panelists discussed how the pandemic has affected efforts to expand PrEP uptake and provide access to HIV testing and treatment. The discussion was held in the lead-up to the New York State AIDS Institute’s annual [PrEP Aware Week \(October 25–31\)](#).

Paul Schindler, editor-in-chief of *Gay City News*, moderated the panel discussion. **Doug Wirth**, President and CEO of Amida Care, and **Johanne Morne**, Director of the New York State Department of Health AIDS Institute, delivered opening remarks.

“This conversation could not be more timely. The pandemic has shined a harsh light on the ongoing health disparities that communities of color, the LGBTQ community, and other vulnerable populations have experienced for decades,” said Wirth. “The same communities that face COVID health disparities are also disproportionately affected by HIV. It’s up to all of us to break down the serious structural barriers to accessing quality, affordable health care, including rampant discrimination and higher rates of poverty.”

Morne addressed the significant advancements that New York has made toward Ending the Epidemic in the past three decades, particularly the state’s success in “bending the curve”—reaching the point where there are fewer HIV infections than deaths among persons with HIV diagnoses. Morne also suggested that the lessons learned from responding to HIV in New York State for the last three plus decades might be applied towards ending the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to Wirth, speaking on the panel were **Dr. Anisha Gandhi**, Acting Assistant Commissioner, Bureau of HIV, NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene; **Dr. David Collymore**, Chief Medical Officer and Senior Vice President of Clinical Affairs; Acacia Network, **Ahmed Mohamed**; Civic Engagement and Community Organizer for NEW Pride Agenda and a PrEP consumer; and **Dr. Asa Radix**, Senior Director of Research and Education, Callen-Lorde Community Health Center.

Dr. Collymore stressed the importance of both telephonic and in-person health care options during the pandemic and urged health care workers fighting the HIV epidemic not to succumb to “COVID fatigue.”

“We recognize that we cannot become complacent and become comfortable,” Collymore said. “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.”

Dr. Gandhi highlighted the equal importance of government, public health agencies, and community support in encouraging PrEP uptake.

“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,” Gandhi said. “We are very much indebted to community partners, stakeholders, and activists to keep us pushing toward our goals.”

Mohamed discussed his lived experience, commenting on the ways in which he had seen PrEP outreach and education fall short, particularly among marginalized communities. Mohamed recalled his experience as an undergraduate at Duke University, where he said the institution places an emphasis on health and wellness, but tends to steer safe sex outreach toward cisgender, heterosexual students.

“There are a myriad of issues that create hurdles for people to get onto PrEP,” Mohamed said. “Amplifying PrEP on the providers’ side does wonders in terms of getting people to think about whether they are a good candidate for PrEP.”

Dr. Radix discussed the importance of more PrEP education and outreach in the trans community and other communities disproportionately impacted by the HIV epidemic, from the perspective of a community health care educator and activist.

“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 Radix.

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.

The webinar was presented in conjunction with the release of Amida Care’s policy brief, “[A Pandemic and an Epidemic: COVID-19 and Ending HIV in New York](#).” The full webinar recording and policy brief are available on Amida Care’s website at www.amidacareny.org.

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.