



For Immediate Release

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Amida Care and NEW Pride Agenda Host Virtual Town Hall on HIV Prevention National Gay Men’s HIV/AIDS Awareness Day

Online discussion featured New York City Council Candidate Chi Ossé, Ahmed Mohamed of NEW Pride Agenda, Nicholas Robinson of the Pride Center of Staten Island, Dr. Raffaele M. Bernardo of Montefiore Medical Center, HIV/AIDS advocate Jahlove Serrano, and Wylliam Smith of NaviGAYte Brooklyn! CAMBA program

To view recording of Town Hall, click [here](#)

New York, NY (September 30, 2021) – On Wednesday, September 29, Amida Care, New York’s largest nonprofit Medicaid Special Needs Health Plan (SNP) designed for New Yorkers affected by HIV, co-hosted a [town hall event](#) with the NEW Pride Agenda, a nonprofit LGBTQ advocacy organization that works to promote LGBTQ rights in New York State, to discuss sexual health services and PrEP, with a focus on men who have sex with men (MSM) and particularly MSM of color.

The town hall was conducted in recognition of National Gay Men’s HIV/AIDS Awareness Day—which is celebrated annually on September 27—and is the latest in a series of events co-hosted by Amida Care and NEW Pride Agenda that emphasize the importance of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), which is proven to reduce the risk of getting HIV from sex by 99%.

The event featured a panel discussion, with HIV and LGBTQ advocacy experts addressing the challenges in PrEP education and outreach among MSM in communities of color. The experts discussed tactics to better engage with these hard-to-reach communities, including ways to provide culturally competent and sensitive care that does not alienate clients from the health care system.

Chi Ossé, Democratic nominee for New York City Council District 36 (Central Brooklyn), began the afternoon with remarks detailing the persistent disparities in HIV diagnoses among MSM communities in New York. “There are over 54,000 men who have sex with men living with HIV in New York City. This accounts for approximately 42% of the total population of New Yorkers living with HIV,” said Ossé. “In the most recent year we have data, in the Bronx, Queens, and Manhattan, the largest number of MSM HIV diagnoses were among Latino and Hispanic MSM. In Brooklyn, the largest number was among Black MSM.”

Ossé concluded on an optimistic note, acknowledging the continuing efforts of the experts on the panel: “While these numbers may be harrowing, there is hope in the work that we all can do to protect our neighbors.”

The panelists began their discussion by highlighting the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to HIV education, prevention, and treatment. Unfortunately, many sexual health clinics closed their doors due to the pandemic, and as a result, in 2020, PrEP uptake in New York State decreased for the first time since the state began collecting this data.

“It was very hard for people, especially during the quarantine, to start PrEP or get to their doctor’s appointments,” noted **Nicholas Robinson**, HIV Prevention Project Manager at the Pride Center of Staten Island. “We’ve had to build partnerships with clinics around Staten Island and off the island, and really utilize all the virtual programs that they have.”

Other panelists emphasized the need to adapt to the realities of the pandemic in the ways they conducted outreach efforts. “We’ve had success by being more active on the dating apps, being on Grindr, being on Jacked, being on Hinge—all of those apps are where you find new people,” said **Wylliam Smith** of the NaviGAYte Brooklyn! CAMBA program. “A lot of people in the MSM community are discreet, they’re down low, they’re not out—meeting people where they are is a good way of opening up the conversation.”

Another common point of emphasis on the afternoon was the need for health care providers to better adapt to the needs of the MSM community. “It’s important to have a staff that mimics your target population. Then, you can really relate to your patient population at a more personal level: have staff that are diverse in gender identity, sexual orientation, and of trans experience,” said **Dr. Raffaele M. Bernardo** of Montefiore Medical Center. “Unless you create a welcoming experience for your clientele, you can forget about having them come back for follow up.”

“There’s a need to highlight the health care providers that are queer-friendly,” added **Ahmed Mohamed**, Program Manager at NEW Pride Agenda, and moderator for the discussion, “so that community members aren’t doing the heavy lifting themselves and being discouraged by trial and error.”

HIV/AIDS advocate **Jahlove Serrano** echoed this sentiment, while also recommending that providers and educators broaden their perspectives in the ways they talked about PrEP. “We can’t leave out HIV positive people when discussing PrEP. There must be a simultaneous conversation when talking about U=U and PrEP,” Serrano said. “Having these continued conversations and letting people know all their options, no matter where they stand, is so important.”

The town hall concluded with an interactive quiz for audience members, aimed at dispelling common myths and misconceptions about PrEP. Local resources for MSM were also available for those interested in learning more about PrEP and how to access it.

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.

NEW Pride Agenda is a nonprofit education and advocacy organization whose mission is to set and frame the new policy agenda and focus areas for LGBTQIA rights in the State of New York. For more information, visit <https://newprideagenda.org>.