Erie marks success in HIV-suppression rates
by Matt Simonette
2018-11-14

Chicago-based Erie Family Health Centers announced in late October that it had reached its highest-ever success rates—about 93.4 percent—in HIV-positive patients achieving suppressed viral loads.

About 49 percent of Americans living with HIV are virally suppressed. Advocates and health providers look upon viral suppression as a key prong in public health strategies to reduce or—as in Illinois—potentially eliminate altogether new HIV transmissions. There has never been a case known to researchers wherein an HIV-positive individual who is virally suppressed has transmitted the virus to another person.

The national average of viral suppression for persons in treatment in Ryan White Act-funded programs is about 80 percent, noted Bridget Magner, Erie’s HIV/Hepatitis C program manager, who manages Erie’s comprehensive Lending Hands for Life (LHL) program.

“We offer primary care, dental care and medical and non-medical case-management, PrEP [pre-exposure prophylaxis], behavioral counseling and psychiatry services, and labs and nutritional counseling,” added Magner. “So we have a whole host of services we can offer to our patients. We also have access to legal, housing and employment partnerships, so that we can take care of our patients’ social-determinants of health as well as their health care.”

Erie staff keeps in close contact with patients receiving HIV-related services, of which there are about 380. Those individuals showing detectable viral loads are assigned what Erie calls a “champion”—an advocate on the staff who will work with the patient to help them reduce whichever barriers they might be facing, such as by arranging transportation or connecting them with mental health support-services.

“The team who serves our patients is one of the most dedicated groups of people that I’ve ever encountered, so they are kind of relentless in making sure that our patients have access to care, are taking their medication and coming to their appointments regularly,” Magner said, adding that the Erie staff was looking ahead to World AIDS Day on Dec. 1 for community outreach, staffing tables at events across the city and holding a patient luncheon. That entire staff, from administrative personnel to physicians, will also attend a training about PrEP to be presented by AIDS Foundation of Chicago. A key deterrent to PrEP use nationwide has been a lack of awareness by medical personnel.

LHL is based at Erie Humboldt Park Health Center with a satellite clinic at the Erie Foster Avenue Health Center. Erie is accepting new patients for its HIV, PrEP and Hepatitis C programs, and Magner said that no patients are turned away because of inability to pay. Those interested in receiving services should call 312-432-7220.