

SPOTLIGHT



WOMEN'S CONNECTION SUMMITS

Learn how AIDS Foundation Chicago connected justice-involved women of color with HIV to medical and social services by organizing Women's Connection Summits. This strategy leveraged community resources and agency partnerships to provide a one-stop shop to women in need of service referrals and tangible resources.

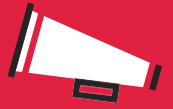
SUMMARY

This project spotlight highlights how AIDS Foundation Chicago (AFC) utilized a Women's Connection Summit model to provide a one-stop shop of resources to women of color who are justice-involved. AFC Women's Connection Summit expos are part of the agency's Safe & Sound Return Partnership (SSRP) program, one of the twelve interventions funded by the Health Resources and Services Administration's (HRSA) HIV/AIDS Bureau (HAB) Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program (RWHAP) Part F, Special Projects of National Significance (SPNS) Initiative: *Improving HIV Health Outcomes through the Coordination of Supportive Employment and Housing Services*. SSRP improves access to medical, employment, and housing services for people with HIV with incarceration histories by reducing barriers at the client, provider, and system levels.

AFC oversees Chicago's HIV case management system of more than 5,000 people with HIV, provides training and technical assistance to community partners, and regularly engages and educates service providers as well as the communities they serve. Their mission is to mobilize communities to create equity and justice for people with HIV and people who are vulnerable to HIV and related chronic conditions.

THE HIV, HOUSING & EMPLOYMENT PROJECT

WHY THIS SPOTLIGHT?



Women who are justice-involved often encounter barriers to accessing health care, employment, and housing services. Thus, it can be difficult to connect this population to medical care and social services tailored to their specific needs. It is critical for community agencies to forge partnerships and leverage existing resources to provide accessible services to hard-to-reach populations.

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CHALLENGES

It is estimated that more than 2.1 million individuals were incarcerated in prisons and jails in the United States during 2016.¹ Of all women who are in jail, nearly two-thirds are women of color—44% are black, 15% are Hispanic, and 5% are of other racial/ethnic backgrounds—compared to 36% of women who identify as white.²

Among individuals previously experiencing incarceration and reentering the community, 76.6% will be re-arrested within 5 years.¹ Such an astounding recidivism rate may be attributed to the plethora of social and medical needs justice-involved individuals have when reentering the community. Such needs include health care insurance^{3,4}, medical and behavioral health treatment⁴, employment⁴, education and vocational training^{4,5}, housing, clothing⁵, food⁵, transportation assistance⁵, and financial assistance.^{4,5} However, all of these resources may not be available to the reentry population, especially individuals who experience stigma and discrimination.

“There is an urgency for accessible resources for justice-involved individuals, especially women with HIV who require HIV care and treatment.”

As of 2015, Illinois' adult correctional system had the country's eighth-highest offender population of 215,200 adults. Additionally, up to 1.6% of individuals in Illinois prisons and 0.53% of individuals in Cook County (Chicago) Jail are currently known to have HIV. In 2016 alone, 66% of people experiencing incarceration with HIV were released from Chicago prisons and jails⁶ and likely in need of basic social and medical necessities. Given the high rate of recidivism in the country, there is an urgency for accessible resources for justice-involved individuals, especially women with HIV who require HIV care and treatment.



STRATEGIES

AFC has implemented Women's Connection Summit events, which are modeled after Illinois Summit of Hope expos and are sanctioned by the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) and the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH). The Women's Connection Summit events serve as a one-stop shop for resources and service referrals for justice-involved individuals in Illinois who need help obtaining assistance necessary to reintegrating into their communities.

As of January 2020, AFC has implemented two Women's Connections Summit expos to tailor services to women of color recently released from the Illinois correctional system. Additionally, in conjunction with the SSRP program, AFC's Women's Connection Summits offers resources to people with HIV seeking employment, housing, and medical care.

The Women's Connection Summit expos have hosted 40+ vendors willing to help justice-involved individuals in finding medical care, educational resources,

employment, housing, legal assistance, reentry, and other social services. To date, two Summits were held during March and July of 2019. The Summits also feature educational roundtables, entitled *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity, Are you PrEPed? (PrEP and Women), and In These Shoes: Reentry Navigation and Empowerment*. Experts from Task Force organizations lead the discussions to provide women with information about HIV care, employment, and housing. Additionally, clinical and administrative staff are present to conduct health screenings, such as HIV testing and to help attendees obtain new state identification cards.

AFC's Women's Connection Summit events also host a Women's Closet. This innovative touch to the Summits is enticing to attendees. Women receive a checklist of vendors when they enter the Summits and receive a sticker from each vendor they visit. Once the checklist is complete and attendees have visited every vendor, they obtain access to the Women's Closet, which is full of professional clothing for them to take home, wear to work, and to job interviews. Going home with new clothing boosts the confidence of the women, as does the on-site beauty vendors, who provide consultations to women about hair and skincare. Women leave the Summits with professional clothing and toiletries, which are practical necessities that also empower the women as they reenter the community.

The Summits also facilitate recruitment of people with HIV into AFC programs. If attendees test



positive for HIV, the SSRP and AFC Care program staff are available to refer them to the SSRP program to initiate the coordination of their HIV care, housing, and employment services. Additionally, Corrections Case Managers are present at the expos to connect with attendees who are newly diagnosed with HIV and other attendees who may benefit from reentry services.

The logistics of the expos are planned by the SSRP Taskforce, which consists of more than 50 staff from AFC and over 30 other local agencies. The SSRP Task Force members volunteer at the Summits and serve as vendors for their organizations, in addition to recruiting other vendors that are knowledgeable about providing services to the reentry population and people with HIV. AFC Task Force members have recruited vendors through meetings with the Midwest AIDS Education and Training Center and at Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program Planning Groups.

KEY TIPS & TAKEAWAYS

- The Summit includes a variety of health services, workshops, exhibit areas, lunch, and a collection of donated work attire from which attendees can choose from to support their reentry into the workforce. Services and resources offered include:
 - counseling and mental health services
 - domestic violence resources
 - food
 - clothing
 - shelter
 - child care,
 - employment and interview services,
 - Narcan training and resources,
 - state identification cards,
 - transportation,
 - legal services, and
 - education and training services.
- Recruit health organizations to provide HIV, hepatitis C, and sexually transmitted infections testing; blood pressure and glucose screenings; and referrals to primary and HIV health care providers.
- Have agency service staff at the expo to increase linkage to care, as the attendees will know a familiar face and the offerings and opportunities of the agency.
- Providing tangible things for women to take home, like clothing and toiletries, brings joy to attendees and empowers them to pursue services with the agencies they connect with at the Summit.
- Venue location affects accessibility. Providing group transportation enhances attendee turnout.
- It is crucial to leverage existing partnerships with local service providers to recruit Summit vendors. However, the Summits can also create opportunities to form new interagency partnerships. When working with new agencies, ensure that their staff know how to work with the population being served, so they can provide clients with appropriate resources.

Task Force members organized three drop off locations across the city where people could donate professional women's attire for the Women's Closet.

One Summit was held at Chicago State University and the other at a large church, Compassion Baptist Church, where there was enough room to hold vendors, roundtables, and the Women's Closet. The SSRP Task Force coordinated with local organizations serving justice-involved clients. Domestic violence and homeless shelters transported women, and AFC provided SSRP clients with transit cards, to ensure the women were able to access the Summits. AFC partnered with IDOC to promote the event to women on parole and probation, so that their attendance at the Summits would count as a parole visit. AFC promoted the Summits using fliers and advertisement on their social media pages.

OUTCOMES

Eighty women attended the first Women's Connection Summit in March, and 50 women attended the second Summit in July. AFC anticipated more women at the expos, but the poor weather likely affected the turnout.

At the Summit, IDPH staff conducted HIV and hepatitis C testing. They identified two women with newly diagnosed HIV, two previously diagnosed women with HIV who were out of care, and nine women with hepatitis C.

Evaluations from this event showed that 100 percent of participants found the Summit valuable and that there is a high need for these resources and services in the community. Many people requested AFC to continue hosting future women-focused Summits.



FIND OUT MORE



Further information about this project can be found at <https://targethiv.org/housing-and-employment>. Here you can find other site spotlights, program implementation manuals, client stories, and other resources.

NEXT STEPS



The Women's Connection Summit expos were well received by both the women in attendance and partner agencies; therefore, AFC coordinated with IDPH to implement two more events for justice-involved women in 2020. The proposed events were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic; however, AFC plans to reschedule the expos in the future. Additionally, the SSRP Task Force is working in tandem with IDOC to make the expos a mandated event for women on parole.

References

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project was supported by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Minority HIV/AIDS Fund (MHAFF) under grant number U90HA31449 and the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)'s HIV/AIDS Bureau (HAB), Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program (RWHAP) Part F, Special Projects of National Significance (SPNS) initiative: Improving Health Outcomes Through the Coordination of Supportive Employment & Housing Services for \$700,000. No percentage of this program was financed with non-governmental sources. This information or content and conclusions are those of the author and should not be construed as the official position or policy of, nor should any endorsements be inferred by HRSA, HHS or the U.S. Government.