

Press Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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SAFE Glen Cove Coalition: HIV, Substance Use Disorder and COVID-19

The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) has researched the intersections of substance use and substance use disorders (SUDs) with vulnerability to COVID-19 and adverse clinical outcomes. They are now looking into the overlap of substance use and HIV and AIDS. NIDA and other National Institutes of Health organizations are using supplementary funds to expand or adapt existing research projects to study the intersection of various health issues with the COVID-19 pandemic. NIDA is prioritizing research into how the coexisting crises of COVID-19, HIV, and substance use, including the opioid crisis, combine to create a disastrous storm, taking lives and overtaxing America's public health systems.

Research has demonstrated that people with SUDs are at increased risk for acquiring and transmitting HIV, both as a result of sharing injection equipment and because substance use may increase the likelihood of impulsive sex and sex without use of condoms or other HIV prevention tools. To encourage transformative science and coordinate HIV related research across the institute, NIDA created its AIDS Research Program (ARP) in 2004 and in 2008 established awards to support individual scientists who propose research relevant to HIV and substance use.

These financial commitments to support and encourage research have led to several significant scientific contributions. A decade ago, NIDA supported a seminal study demonstrating that HIV treatment is prevention, finding that scaling up HIV treatment in people who inject drugs resulted in reductions in community-level viral load and HIV transmission. NIDA-funded research also demonstrated that addiction treatment, especially medications for opioid use disorder, is a necessary part of HIV care and leads to improved viral load, CD4 cell count, and retention in HIV care.

With additional funds now available to study COVID-19, there is great opportunity for HIV and addiction researchers to make important advances in understanding how COVID-19 intersects with substance use, the opioid epidemic, and HIV. It is already clear that these crises are intertwined and especially impacting vulnerable populations, but many gaps in our understanding remain.

Researchers maintain several co-occurring health problems, including cardiovascular and pulmonary diseases and diabetes, confer greater risk of SARS-CoV-2 infection, severity of disease, and poor outcomes. Additional research could lend information about the clinical impact of COVID-19 on people who use drugs and are living with HIV, as well as the impact that mitigation strategies like social distancing is having on individual health, mental health, and substance use and access to HIV and SUD treatment services. And while knowledge is expanding on how substance use and HIV impact the brain and central nervous system, there is no information regarding synergistic short or long-term effects in the presence of COVID-19. There is great potential for knowledge and experience from AIDS care to inform COVID-19 treatment, and conversely, care strategies learned during the COVID-19 crisis could be adapted to HIV outbreaks still seen worldwide that are often connected to injection drug use.

Particularly crucial to NIDA research are intersections of HIV, SUD, and COVID-19 among racial and ethnic minority groups, including African Americans, who are consistently disproportionately burdened with poor outcomes across these health conditions. With African Americans suffering and dying from COVID-19 and HIV at higher rates and facing rapidly increasing rates of overdose mortality, research into structural racism and resulting health disparities is more critical than ever. This should include research into stigma within healthcare, which can impede access to care for people of color and those living with HIV and drug addiction.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) is a United States federal-government research institute whose mission is to "lead the Nation in bringing the power of science to bear on drug abuse and addiction". For more information please visit www.drugabuse.gov.

The SAFE Glen Cove Coalition is conducting an opioid prevention awareness campaign entitled. "Keeping Glen Cove SAFE," in order to educate and update the community regarding opioid use and its consequences. To learn more about the SAFE Glen Cove Coalition please follow us on www.facebook.com/safeglencovecoalition or visit SAFE's website to learn more about the Opioid and COVID-19 Epidemics at www.safeglencove.org.