Best of You

March 5, 2018 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

Over a decade ago, Ryan Clary shifted his priorities for health policy advocacy to viral hepatitis. This new focus was an outgrowth of his experiences working at HIV-related nonprofit groups like Project Inform and the San Francisco AIDS Foundation.

Clary learned along the way that the population of people living with HIV in the United States also has high rates of viral hepatitis. About 25 percent of folks with HIV nationwide also have hepatitis C virus (HCV) and about 10 percent of HIV-positive people across the country also have hepatitis B virus (HBV).

Despite these high coinfection rates, there were scant resources to fight HCV and HBV compared with those to combat HIV. Although viral hepatitis awareness and funding have improved—due in part to Clary's leadership as executive director of the National Viral Hepatitis Roundtable (NVHR)—much is left to be done.

His strategy for ending the HCV and HBV epidemics is to apply the grassroots tactics used by HIV advocates—such as empowering the voices of people living with HIV to communicate directly with their elected officials—to what has become one of the most urgent public health concerns in the United States.

To better address the needs of people living with hep B and hep C, NVHR has taken on the role of convener for U.S. advocacy efforts to end the viral hepatitis crisis. Of course, Clary sits at the helm of these ongoing efforts. He even sits on Hep's advisory board. Click here for more about Clary, his NVHR work and how you can get involved in advocacy.

Awareness and funding continue to be major challenges when it comes to viral hepatitis advocacy. What they have in common is stigma. Advocates like Clary and others attribute restrictions to treatment access, for example, and other such obstacles to the unfair and negative beliefs associated with viral hepatitis.

This stigma often gets in the way of commonsense approaches to managing the viral hepatitis crisis. Layer on top the harsh realities of the growing opioid epidemic, especially the rising rates of injection drug use nationwide, and you have a recipe for disaster. Thankfully, many advocates are fighting back.

Studies have shown that hep C rates are increasing along with injection drug use. Therefore, efforts to curb injection drug use should lower hep C rates. To achieve this goal, advocates around

the world are already successfully operating safe injection facilities. Click here and here to read more about related U.S. efforts.

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