UPDATE: More Cases Identified in Boston HIV Outbreak

Health officials remain concerned about HIV and hepatitis C transmissions during COVID-19.

April 21, 2021 By Trent Straube

UPDATE: The HIV outbreak in Boston now includes 113 people; 13 of them were diagnosed between January 1 and February 28, reports the Boston Globe in an article dated April 20. As noted in the original January 28 item below, the new HIV cases mostly involve people who inject drugs and have experienced homelessness.

In January 2020, health officials in Boston warned that an uptick in HIV cases should serve as a "wake-up moment" and that even a small cluster could easily expand. This January, local public health leaders are once again sounding the alarm about a potential surge of new HIV cases amid delays in hepatitis C testing and treatment, Boston 25 News reports.

Of course, in the 12 months between these two news reports COVID-19 shut down much of the nation. As a result, efforts that might have gone toward tamping down the emerging HIV cluster were instead aimed at battling the novel coronavirus. Testing, treatment and outreach for HIV and hepatitis C were delayed.

"The concern is that there is likely some community transmission going on that we aren't able to capture as quickly," Richard Baker, MPH, director of the mobile prevention team at Victory Programs, told the news station. "We were already seeing localized outbreaks of HIV associated with injection drug use in the Boston area. That cluster has not gone away since the pandemic started."

Baker noted that Victory Programs is trying to increase its outreach efforts to make up for time lost during COVID-19. "Once we have someone who's identified as being positive, whether for HIV or hepatitis C, the immediate follow-up move is…to have a conversation with them and get them immediately linked to care. But all of that process has become more complex [because of COVID-19]."

Victory Programs helps individuals and families facing homelessness, addiction and chronic illnesses, such as HIV and hepatitis C.

The HIV cluster reported in January 2020 involved seven people who injected drugs and were

homeless; most of these were diagnosed in the previous month. In contrast, in the entire year before the identification of that cluster, 25 people in Boston who had experienced homelessness and were injection drug users tested positive for HIV. For more details, see "HIV Uptick Among Homeless in Boston Area Spurs 'Wake-Up Moment.'"

Both Hepatitis C, which is an infection of the liver, and HIV can be spread through shared needles. To learn more about transmission, prevention and treatments, see the HIV Basics in POZ and the Hepatitis C Basics in HepMag.com.

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