Get Together

December 4, 2017 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

Twenty years ago, Gloria Searson found out that she was living with hepatitis C virus (HCV). A few years before her HCV-positive diagnosis, she tested HIV positive.

In fact, Searson found out she was living with HCV as a result of her participation in a study of HIV progression in women. She was told by her doctor that she had only 30 years to live with hep C. But she didn't take that as a final answer.

After years working at various advocacy groups, in 2009 she founded the Coalition on Positive Health Empowerment (COPE), which provides services that tackle chronic liver-related diseases and other conditions that affect the liver.

Searson succeeded in helping others and herself. Her HIV viral load is undetectable, and she was cured of hep C in 2014. She had gone on HCV treatment in 2004, but she couldn't manage the side effects of those older hep C treatments.

COPE uses a peer-led model, among many others, to integrate HIV and hep C into chronic, manageable diseases. The organization uses a holistic approach to address the social needs of patients. Click here to learn more about COPE.

One of the most important lessons Searson learned in her advocacy work is the importance of building coalitions. Getting people together to do the work—whether it's providing services, changing hearts and minds or opening doors to funding—increases effectiveness.

The same is true for research and treatment. Case in point: the U.S. opioid crisis. As injection drug use increases, so does the transmission of HIV and hep C. Ending the opioid crisis is imperative for public health. To make that happen will take coalitions and several approaches.

To that end, Thomas Frieden, MD, the former director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has offered a series of recommendations. He warns that there are no simple solutions but believes that accelerating progress is possible. Click here to read more.

Searson was tested for hep C because she was in a research study for women living with HIV. That led her to advocate for hep C testing of all people who have HIV. Taking this idea a step further through legislation could be beneficial.

New research suggests that state laws mandating health care providers to offer hep C testing can

help significantly increase screening rates for the virus and linkage to care among those newly diagnosed with HCV. Click here for more.

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