HEPATITIS C: THE NEW EPIDEMIC

• Nationwide, the CDC estimates nearly 2.4 million Americans are living with hepatitis C and the number is escalating due to the U.S. opioid crisis.

• More people die each year from hepatitis C than all the other 60 reported infectious diseases combined.

ACR Health’s one-stop shop approach to Hepatitis C care greatly improves the chances that a person with the disease will follow through all the steps necessary to be cured. The state’s goal in establishing the HCV Patient Navigation Program was to:

- identify those at risk for hepatitis C,
- support them through complete diagnostic testing, medical evaluation, and treatment,
- link infected patients to medical care,
- prevent reinfection to maintain liver health after cure.

ACR Health provides individuals with information and materials to remain hepatitis C free. It is no longer mandatory to stop using injection drugs to be eligible for treatment. Everyone is evaluated according to their specific situation. If you would like to know more, call 315.475.2430.

WINNING THE FIGHT AGAINST HEPATITIS C

ACR Health has expanded care options for patients at our Drug User Health Hub, now offering a full-scale program to diagnose and treat hepatitis C. From the time they test positive, a client can stay with ACR Health Clinic services all the way through to a cure.

Since last November, 40 people have begun hepatitis C treatment through the clinic; all of them are individuals who use our Syringe Exchange or Health Hub services. They are the most likely group to have hepatitis C, which is spread almost exclusively through sharing equipment used to inject drugs.

Among the first to be cured through clinic treatment is 27-year-old Damon Shanley who got hepatitis C five years ago by sharing injection equipment. Now, more than a year into recovery, Damon concedes that he should have known better than to share equipment with someone he knew had hepatitis C, but that chronic brain disease distorted his thinking.

Back on track, Damon began his prescribed course of the drug Mavyret in November. He stuck to the regimen and within two weeks his viral load was undetectable.*

“Very often we would lose people between the time of an initial positive result and scheduling their next appointment at a specialist’s office for a follow-up confirmatory test,” said Peter Emery, Hepatitis C Patient Navigator. “Now the confirmatory test along with all of the medical appointments are conducted at ACR Health, a place the client knows, trusts and will gladly come back to.”

On February 28 Damon returned to ACR Health to review results of his final blood test with Emery. The virus was undetectable and Damon is considered cured, with no further testing needed. “This is a very good day,” he said. Now in recovery, cured of hepatitis C, fully employed at a job he likes, and enjoying a relationship with a girlfriend from his home town, Damon is set to go on with his life which had been interrupted by addiction and disease. “It’s like I have been set free.”

*According to its manufacturer, Mavyret is the only eight-week cure for all common types of hepatitis C. Cure, in the case of hepatitis C, means that the virus is not detectable in the blood three months after treatment ends.
The 21st annual Hike for Life on April 27 marks the unofficial start of ACR Health’s 2019 fundraising season. Once again, I will be asking for your support and thanking you from my heart for your generosity.

Over the years, you have saved many lives and improved the quality of many others. You have helped take the edge off loneliness and provided meals and other necessities for people with HIV.

Our HIV/AIDS support and prevention work in the Mohawk Valley began in 1983, but it was not until years later (1999) that we set this permanent annual event to raise awareness and money so we could effectively educate Mohawk Valley youth on how to stay HIV free.

Then, as now, the government spends more money caring for those who have HIV than is spent on preventing new cases. There is simply not enough funding to rely solely on the government to educate youth about sexual safety. ACR Health’s approach is two-pronged: support those with HIV through quality care management and effective programming, and directly educate sexually active and at-risk youth and adults about sexual health and safety. Your support is vital for this work. Government grants do not cover the cost.

At our core, we are an agency that helps people with their toughest problems. We have a strong history of being both edgy and caring. We save lives. We change communities.

In our first 35 years, we found that you actually can change the world — one person at a time. We have more than 40 programs designed to make life better for residents of our nine-county service area.

We serve nearly 20,000 individuals each year: listening, caring, advising, advocating, and affirming. We are an agency that is big enough to handle the toughest problems, small enough to respond to one person’s call for help, and always with the focus on opening doors to create healthy communities.

We have asked for your help in the past and you have been generous. Please be generous once again. You will love the revamped Hike for Life, with its new games, beautiful location (SUNY Polytechnic Institute in Utica) and excellent refreshments. Join us Saturday, April 27 at 1:00 p.m. You can find more on our website ACRHealth.org. THANK YOU VERY MUCH!

Please support us in this work. Come to an event or hit the donate button on ACRHealth.org.

THANK YOU MUCH

ACR Health has a tool that can detect fentanyl in substances before they are injected. The “new” tool is actually a standard urine drug test strip traditionally used to screen for the drug Fentanyl in urine samples. Now ACR Health is using the test strips to save lives.

Under ideal conditions, the strips work like this: Once a substance such as heroin has been prepared in a sterile, never before used container called a cooker, the shot is drawn into a sterile, never before used syringe, and then set aside.

More water is added to the cooker, in order to test the residue for the presence of Fentanyl. The test strip is dipped in the liquid for 15 seconds, then laid across the cooker to process for about 5 minutes to receive the results.

If one line appears, Fentanyl is present. Two lines (in the center) indicate that there is no Fentanyl in the solution. One drawback to the test strips is that they give no indication of how much Fentanyl is present. However, they are very useful in helping people who use injection drugs to reduce their risk of overdose.

“The fact that the substance might come up as fentanyl usually does not deter the person from using it, but they will likely start with a test shot or a lower dose and adjust,” said ACR Health Syringe Exchange Program Manager Roberto Gonzalez. “This is an opportunity for discussion and allowing people to have some ownership over their use.”

The strips cost about $1 per test and are being paid for by a $2,000 grant from Excellus BlueCross BlueShield. “This grant demonstrates our corporate commitment to support local organizations that share our mission as a nonprofit health plan,” said Eve VandeWaal, regional president of Excellus BlueCross BlueShield. “We are dedicated to developing and growing relationships with agencies that work to enhance quality of life, including health status, in upstate New York.”

ACR Health began distributing the test strips in January to people who use opioids. The strips have gained acceptance in the community and so far, nearly a hundred individuals are regularly using them to help guard against overdose.

“It is still a new strategy for the clients we serve. Fentanyl has become so widespread it can be present in almost any drug,” Gonzalez said, “and people need to be very careful.” Gonzalez recommends that everyone test each new batch at least once so they know what they are using.
ACR Health’s 9th Annual Cardboard Sledding Derby at Four Seasons Golf & Ski Center in Fayetteville, with its boisterous rivalries, sled-to-sled competition, cool costumes, and tempting selection of food and drinks was the perfect opportunity for Central New York families to get out, enjoy the winter, and raise money to make their community a better place to live.

“The sledding derby was followed by food and beverage sampling inside a heated tent, featuring restaurants: Bridge Street Tavern, The Chef and the Cook, Dinosaur Bar-B-Que, Gianelli Sausage, Chazed and Confused, Karen’s Catering, Luc’s, Limp Lizard, Murphy’s Specialized Pastry, Pastabilities, Reesett Coffee, Strong Hearts Café, and Texas Roadhouse.”

The first step toward winning New York’s full bore fight to End the AIDS Epidemic by 2020 (ETE) is to identify people who have HIV and are unaware of their status. United Way of Central New York has helped ACR Health beef up staffing to increase testing hours and availability.

One of the people brought on board was End the Epidemic Specialist Tim Hurn who was on duty last October when a 55-year-old man came in to be tested. He was sexually active but had not been screened for HIV for two years. He had been feeling unwell.

Tim used the standard rapid antibody test that showed results in 10 minutes. Just halfway through the wait, two solid lines began to show on the test strip. Reactive for HIV. It was the first HIV positive test Tim had overseen. He was nervous on the inside, but stayed calm as he relayed the results.

“After all, this is why we do the tests; HIV is a disease we can now successfully treat. People can get the virus under control and live a good life.”

The prevention team swung into action, quickly contacted Upstate Hospital Immune Health Services and scheduled an immediate appointment with a specialist. Then, a meeting with a Health Insurance Navigator to make sure the man had the most appropriate insurance plan, followed by a session with Ryan White Case Management to set medical goals, viral suppression, medical transportation, and treatment adherence. The man met with his Care Manager before leaving our offices that day. Within a week, he was on antibiotics, antiretroviral medication, and reported back that he “felt better already.”

“This client was very grateful and appreciative that he could put a name to what his body was feeling, so he could address it,” said Tim Hurn. “He worried about the stigma of HIV, though. As a healthcare professional he had seen it firsthand.”

The man’s CD4 count was under 200 indicating that he had AIDS. Nevertheless, he focused on his health and the treatment plan outlined for him on that first day. He had every intention of fighting and getting back to work. Then tragically, he was stricken with pneumonia only weeks after his diagnosis. He did not recover.

This story isn’t new. It is one of thousands going back decades to the start of this HIV/AIDS epidemic. Our friends, families, and loved ones, continue to be affected by this epidemic, but together, ACR Health and United Way are helping to give these stories a different ending. Together we’re helping to stop the spread of HIV.

ACR Health has extended hours for testing from 9:00 a.m. - 8:00 p.m. on Tuesdays only at the Syracuse office, 627 West Genesee Street.

Testing is offered from 9:00 a.m.-3:30 p.m. daily at Syracuse, Utica, Watertown, and Canton offices by appointment or on a walk-in basis.

ACR Health recommends that sexually active individuals be tested at least once a year. Anyone engaging in risky behavior should be tested eight weeks after each encounter.
Karla Goes the Distance for the Q Center

There are countless ways to support ACR Health, but the one chosen by Karla, a long distance supporter from New York City set the bar for originality in fundraising sky high.

A young woman in the audience during last fall’s Q Awards in New York City was so inspired by the stories she heard about ACR Health’s Q Centers that she vowed then and there to raise money for them. What Karla Schmidt did next was so unanticipated and wonderful as to leave us nearly breathless. Karla solicited her friends and co-workers to sponsor her to run in the New York City Marathon. She raised $1,752.07 which she donated to the Q Center.

“Af karian the amazing work that the Q Center does, I knew that I wanted to run to raise funds for this,” said Karla. “Support for LBGTQ youth is vital, and lifesaving. The more encouragement that we can give to people to not only be themselves but to thrive, and be happy, the better.”

Karla, who is a Senior Event Producer for FIRST, travels the world creating experiences and events for some of the top brands. “Karla is an amazing person who, when she gives, gives straight from the heart. She never ceases to amaze me with her capacity for caring,” said her colleague and Q Center Awards co-chairman, Jeff Kalpak.

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The Q Awards, which were sponsored by Mastercard, generated $32,300 to support areas of greatest need within the Q Center.

Excellent Advocacy by Marsha Merren

Keeping people out of nursing homes when they don’t need or want to be there is Marsha Merren’s job. She’s ACR Health’s ICAN (Independent Consumer Advocacy Network) Ombudsman whose work certainly saves Medicaid and Medicare money, but most importantly rescues individuals and their families from a maze of red tape and the potential isolation of a nursing home. Case in point:

At first the case of Lee, a refugee who was deaf and neither spoke nor understood English or ASL (American Sign Language), seemed almost insurmountable. Lee suffered from a debilitating condition; was terrified of having corrective surgery; and required 24/7 care due to the pain and difficulty of walking to and from the bathroom.

The insurance company that issued Lee’s Managed Long Term Care policy denied her family’s request for around the clock nursing aid care. An attorney for Legal Services of Central New York took the fight as far as she could, and when the insurance company stopped responding to her, turned to ACR Health’s Marsha Merren for help. It took Marsha more than two months of phone calls, emails, appeals, and an official grievance filed with the Department of Health, but she secured personal care assistance sufficient to meet Lee’s needs.

“Marsha took great care in gathering facts relating to this case. She painstakingly set forth the facts and arguments in her grievance against the insurance company, and educated the NYS Department of Health staff tasked with investigating the complaint,” wrote attorney Shelly P. Tsai in praise of Marsha’s work.

“Marsha is a strong advocate who does not give up until her clients have the services they deserve,” said ACR Health’s Director of Insurance Programs, Steve Wood. “We are lucky to have such a strong individual, who has the client’s best interests at heart, in the ICAN Program.”

As complex and maddening as her job can be, Marsha loves everything about fighting for those powerless to help themselves. “When it comes to helping my clients my approach is, if the insurance plan is supposed to provide a service and is not providing it, I will pursue a positive resolution until resolved regardless of time or dead ends.”

Marsha’s work is so valued because she fearlessly breaks through the “dead ends” and brings care and comfort to people in long term care.

The minimum we ask you to fundraise is $25; participants are encouraged to form teams and fundraise to win awards and great incentives. Register at ACRHealth.org/events.

If you would like a paper copy of the registration form for the 21st Annual Hike for Life, email events@ACRHealth.org or call 315-475-2430.

ACR Health’s ICAN Ombudsman and Community Health Advocate (CHA) programs are funded by Community Service Society of New York, an independent voice for positive action on behalf of more than 3 million low-income New Yorkers. To learn more: ACRHealth.org/health.

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ACR Health offers its services without discrimination based on age, race, creed, color, gender, sexual orientation, economic status, political affiliation, marital status, handicapped status, or mode of transmission.

ACR Health is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

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UPCOMING EVENTS

April 12 - Friday
6th Annual STRIKE IT OUT BOWLING NIGHT
6:30 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.  Bowl Mor Lanes • 201 Highland Avenue, East Syracuse
Admission $20 per person (includes bowling, shoes, pizza and soda)

April 27, 2019 - Saturday
21st Annual Hike for Life
Join us at SUNY Polytechnic Institute in Utica, for a fun event featuring games, lively festivities, and prizes. The Hike for Life begins at 1:00 p.m.

May 28, 2019 - Tuesday
Paint the Town RED
Annual press conference kicking off a week of AIDS, LGBTQ, Addiction, and Poverty awareness that culminates in the painting of a red stripe on Salina Street to promote the AIDS Walk/Run: 10:00 a.m. Clinton Square, downtown Syracuse.

June 2, 2019 - Sunday
27th Annual AIDS Walk/Run-5K walk/run
Central New York's oldest and most successful AIDS fundraiser begins at 10:00 a.m. at Beaver Lake Nature Center, Baldwinsville.

October 6, 2019 - Sunday
20th Annual First Frost Festivities
Join us for fun and games inside the Thompson Park Zoo and Conservancy, featuring lively contests and prizes. Event begins at 1:00 p.m. Please leave your furry friends at home.

All proceeds support ACR Health’s mission to create healthy communities by stopping the spread of HIV/AIDS, leading the charge for LGBTQ equality, and the fight against addiction and poverty.

INVEST IN YOUR COMMUNITY.
GET INVOLVED TODAY!
ACRHealth.org/events • 315.475.2430

Q CENTERS FOR LGBTQ YOUTH
Resources throughout Central, Northern, and Mohawk Valley regions. For information call 800.475.2430 or email QCenter@ACRHealth.org
Group times listed ACRHealth.org/youth

TESTING SERVICES
HIV, gonorrhea, chlamydia, syphilis, and Hepatitis C. Testing@ACRHealth.org

NARCAN TRAINING
Monthly trainings at ACR Health offices. Appointments: Narcan@ACRHealth.org

SYRINGE EXCHANGES
• Syracuse: 637 West Genesee Street and Outreach Van at corner of Dudley and Fitch Streets
• Utica: 287 Genesee Street
• Watertown: 135 Franklin Street
SEF@ACRHealth.org

DRUG USER HEALTH HUB
Provides onsite access to acute medical care, medication assisted therapy, and linkage to additional medical resources.

HEALTH INSURANCE PROGRAMS
Health insurance enrollment and advocacy. Navigator@ACRHealth.org

GET INVOLVED. JOIN THE TEAM.
Current positions listed at ACRHealth.org/careers.
For more information on all programs or if you wish to unsubscribe from the newsletter:
information@ACRHealth.org or 315.475.2430