



The Women's Connection, led by AIDS Foundation of Chicago, is a community-driven network of women in Chicago that collectively works to identify strategies to increase the engagement of women of color in the HIV continuum of care. This project is a part of ViiV Healthcare's *Positive Action for Women* initiative to develop innovative community collaborations to break down isolation and stigma for women of color living with HIV.

Overview of the Women's Connection

In sync with Illinois' **Getting To Zero (GTZ) Plan** and the local data, the Women's Connection uses a three-pronged approach to strengthen women's leadership, develop a local plan and actionable recommendations and improve care services.



Regular meetings, skills building, leadership coaching, collaborative planning and environmental programming that reflects contextual barriers that complicate care engagement, like domestic violence and recent incarceration

- **Who?** Multi-sector providers, cis and trans women, working with women living with HIV
- Bolsters the community of organizations for collaboration and coordination of resources, networks, activities and knowledge to address needs of cis and trans women
- **Who?** Women of color living with and affected by HIV
- Training and support for women to empower themselves through knowledge and leadership opportunities to affect change in their relationships, communities and lives
- **Who?** Women living with and affected by HIV and their social networks
- Adaptive response to women's needs through events that de-stigmatize HIV and connect people to resources and services they desire

“Because we know women are multi-faceted, we knew we needed to take a multi-level, multi-lens approach.”

— Cynthia Tucker
AIDS Foundation of Chicago

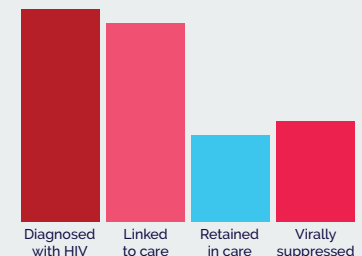
Our Success – Two Years In

- Created the recurring **Women's Summit** to connect women facing structural and social barriers to services designed specifically for them, including arts and culture elements such as the storytelling performance called *Take My Hand*.
- **Isolated women are connected to care** on the day of diagnosis.
- **Women are reporting more empowerment and acceptance** from their family and friends.
- **More women of color, especially trans women, are at the table** because of built-in avenues for leadership; five trans women of color have been newly appointed to Community Planning Councils.
- **Women and girls' issues were prioritized** in 80 recommendations in the Getting to Zero plan.
- **New energy and ideas are being infused** into the response, catalyzing more collaboration and innovation in Chicago.
 - » **225% increase** in the number of organizations in the Task Force. Member organizations also represent a **greater variety of services impacting womens' lives.**



Data-Informed Strategy

The Women's Connection looks at where women are falling off the **HIV continuum of care**—and develops strategies together to help re-connect women to the care that fits their lives best.



The Motivation for the Women's Connection

- **The continued murder and mistreatment of trans women** in Chicago opened up feelings of helplessness and the desire to fix a broken system and broken hearts.
- **Women were often not at the table** on HIV-related issues, local research and community planning. Experience showed that women were eager to be a part of something more if they were given the opportunity.
- **Local data** highlighted and underscored these realities. Cis and trans women of color were heavily impacted by HIV and were not being adequately supported in local planning or service delivery. Late HIV diagnosis was high.
- Established and well-respected services are available in Chicago, but there was **no centralized mechanism** to facilitate communication, data sharing, planning or collaboration to connect women to the care they were asking for.

How do we reach more women living with HIV? Sharing data, a sharpened focus and an appetite for adaptability.

We know that women WANT to be in care. In its initial assessment, the **Women's Connection** found that a main challenge to reaching more women is a lack of epidemiology and community-level data on cis and trans women of color.

The Task Force took on this challenge and uses data in an innovative way to directly address the systems that keep women from care.

- **More up-to-date HIV continuum of care data** are brought to the group. AIDS Foundation Chicago coordinates most case management in Chicago and can help identify where people are engaged and where people are falling out of care.
- **Community assessments** and **group discussion** of data early and often help identify current barriers to care.
- A new **shared data tool** has been developed and being tested with over 30 organizations to more effectively count cis and trans women of color so future planning includes all women.

The creation of the Women's Connection's hallmark community event series—the **Women's Summit**—evolved from an initial idea for a Women's Closet, an event to help women get clothes and items needed to build self esteem and employment prospects.

With both the Task Force and Learning Exchange Circle at the table, the **Women's Connection** refined their focus to support women facing structural barriers—women who were **recently re-entering** society after incarceration, women experiencing **homelessness**, or women experiencing **domestic partner violence**. This involved bringing in other sectors to the Task Force, such as **corrections agencies**, **workforce development organizations** and **women's shelters**, to develop **Women's Summits** and move toward a bigger solution.

With many partners at the table, the Women's Summit evolved to be about more than access to HIV care. It elevated **prevention and self-care** as central pieces of the puzzle. Women often put their own self-care on the back-burner, so the Task Force brought in hair stylists, make-up and clothes donations, mentorship and job readiness experts.

Because of this **organic** approach, the Women's Connection reached women they had never worked with before, diagnosed several HIV and hepatitis C infections and were able to link them all to services on the **day of their diagnoses**.



“As far as my trans experience, a lot of my trans sisters were being murdered. A lot of my trans sisters were being diagnosed as positive with HIV. And they didn't have outlets or resources. I wanted to see what I could do to help my sisters. I wanted to go further, and The Women's Connection really helped me with that.”

— Meghan Williams
Learning Exchange Circle Member



Elements of Success

Multi-Sectoral

A multi-sector group is crucial to work against some of the systems that don't allow women to stay in the HIV continuum of care.

Like-Mindedness

There is a singularity of focus and mutual striving towards the same goal—everyone is allowed to voice their thoughts.

Trusted Leadership

Inspirational, transparent, open and responsive. Leadership was already deeply embedded in the organizational landscape and with the community, which supports the intentional connectivity needed to make real change.

Clarity of Purpose

People understand that they have a place and a role within the Getting to Zero plan. Organizations have identified which recommendations are aligned with the services they provide and have signed on to be a part of that systems work.

Passion for Purpose

With members who are all highly committed to serving women, Task Force meetings provide space for innovative ideas and organic leadership to surface.

Network of Relationships

Relationships are critical to building community trust for the Women's Connection. All members have extensive networks that they leverage for the success of the initiative as a whole.

Reputation

Community members know that the Women's Connection members are very approachable, knowledgeable and have high-quality resources. If they don't know the answer to something a community member asks about, they have the connections to find someone who is knowledgeable.

Use of Data

In addition to the central role data plays to help the Task Force to identify barriers to HIV care, every meeting and activity is evaluated and reflected back into programming to remain relevant and keep with the original vision.

“We all come to meetings with the same purpose, to learn and get things done.”

— **Christina Butler**
Learning Exchange Circle Member

“The main thing that's contributed to success is that this wasn't a Task Force that people were hand-picked for. It was put out there and you decided if you wanted to join. The women who are on this Task Force are committed to seeing change.”

— **Donna Sinclair**
Heartland Alliance

“What's unique about this is that a lot of the women who are at the table are there not because they have to be, but because they're passionate about what we're doing.”

— **L'Oreal Bailey**
AIDS Foundation of Chicago



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Challenges and Solutions



With Chicago spanning over 200 square miles, it is a challenge to **connect with women and the 30+ organizations in the Task Force** in a space that is easily accessible to all. AIDS Foundation Chicago adapted by **partnering with other ASO's** on the South Side and started using **Basecamp**, a project management software, to keep people connected between meetings.



Reaching isolated women is inherently challenging as their connections to social networks dwindle after an HIV diagnosis. **The Women's Connection has prioritized technical assistance** in branding, marketing and boosting mainstream visibility to connect with more women outside of their current networks.



There are dynamic challenges to **evaluating the impact of movement-building and collective impact** rooted in an adaptive and organic approach. For women affected by HIV, what looks like a small change in numbers can make a big difference in the lives of women. **The rollout of a shared data collection tool** is in progress and Task Force members will be examining how this new approach impacts their ability to evaluate and understand impact.



As a multi-organization collaborative, Task Force members **use a variety of data systems** based on funding and other factors. This was a major challenge in creating this shared data collection tool. In retrospect, Task Force members suggest that if another collective is to tackle this important process, they **include clinics and health care organizations** in the process from the very beginning and **prioritize linking the new tool** to a system that is already in place.



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“ This type of adaptivity is due in part to the “flexibility” of the ViiV Healthcare model and their focus on impact. They are allowing us to use the data to do a more community-driven program that is really innovative. ”

— Cynthia Tucker
AIDS Foundation of Chicago



CONNECT WITH US

The Women's Connection model is a flexible, adaptive approach that responds to the complex systems and lives of women of color living with and affected by HIV. If you are interested in learning more about the model to help you adapt or replicate elements of the work in your area, please connect with us!



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To learn more about our grantees and the program, visit <https://www.viivhealthcare.com/en-us/positive-action-for-women/>



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