

## Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now How medical advancements have changed AIDS treatment in Minnesota 01GK7GDCMGQ3HQB468QHBH1M02

CATHY WURZER: Today, on this World AIDS Day, there are more than 1.2 million people living with HIV in the US. There are about 9,000 Minnesotans among that number. When AIDS was first discovered in the 1980s, as it ripped through the gay community, it was considered a death sentence.

Since that time, medical advancements allow people with AIDS and HIV to live long and healthy lives. But the picture is not bright for everyone. Many struggle to get the care they need. For more about the status of HIV and AIDS today, Dylan Boyer joins us. He's the Director of Development at the Aliveness Project, a community resource center for people living with HIV. Dylan, thanks for being here.

**DYLAN BOYER:** Thank you so much for having me. It's a pleasure to speak with you.

**CATHY WURZER:** A big pleasure to have you here on the program. Thank you. Big question to start with-- what's the state of AIDS and HIV in this country in the year 2022?

**DYLAN BOYER:** The state is optimistically hopeful. And so biomedical advances have really come a long way to let people live with HIV long and healthy lives. But yet, we see so many people still disadvantagedly burdened by the disease of HIV, and where we as a nation can step up to be able to fill those gaps to serve all people in this country and being able to make sure that we can end HIV in our lifetime.

**CATHY WURZER:** You mentioned that this disease does disproportionately impact certain groups, certain racial ethnic minorities-- gay, bisexual men-- what's being done to battle the disease in these communities?

**DYLAN BOYER:** Yeah, absolutely. Just to kind of paint a little bit more of an image for you and your audience, gay and bisexual men are still the highest rated people of getting HIV today. But particularly, Black men who have sex with men, there is a 50% chance that they will get HIV in their lifetime-- comparatively to white men who have sex with men, where it is about a 1 in 11% chance that they will get HIV.

So that's what we're looking at. And we cannot end HIV without ending systemic racism. We also see people who use drugs, especially intravenously, are disproportionately affected, people who are experiencing homelessness, folks in the trans and non-binary communities, especially trans women of color, face higher risk of HIV. And they also risk higher rates of violence as well.

And so ending HIV is a big thing. And we cannot do it without looking at the racial inequalities that exist in our nation.

**CATHY WURZER:** A lot has been done, as you know, around the public health messaging around HIV. And yet, Minnesota has seen the same number of new diagnoses since 2000. And with all the public health messaging over curtailing the spread of the disease, why aren't these messages apparently landing where they should?

**DYLAN BOYER:** For a long time, these messages have been, in my opinion, not culturally competent messages. And so we need to make sure that these messages are received by the communities that are most disproportionately affected by HIV. And to do that, we need to engage with communities, engage with the members of these communities and ask them and be part of this mission with them. And that is just something that I'm committed to and that the Aliveness Project is committed to.

**CATHY WURZER:** Let's talk about treatment. Really, treatments have come a very long way. As I mentioned, it was a death sentence back in the '80s, and now people who have HIV can live a pretty decent life. How exciting is that? And do you see anything on the horizon to even increase life expectancy for those living with the disease?

**DYLAN BOYER:** Yeah. Yeah, I myself am actually a person living with HIV. I've been living with it for six years now. And I just take one pill a day to continue to keep my virus levels low, which we call undetectable.

So when my HIV status becomes undetectable, that means my body is perfectly healthy and I am not able to transmit that virus onto anybody else. So we can stop the spread of the disease from person to person if we get everybody on this amazing treatment. And thinking about the future too, there are now HIV injectable treatments where you can go into your provider and get one shot a month.

And we see that as the future of HIV medication. Right now, it's a month. Maybe eventually, it will be three months. Maybe eventually, I could just go to the doctor one time a year and get an injectable and being able to continue to be undetectable and live a healthy life.

**CATHY WURZER:** Wow. That's amazing. Although, as I'm sure you know, understanding and acceptance within US society hasn't improved as dramatically as the treatments that have improved the lives of folks with AIDS and HIV. What about that? What about discrimination? What about the stereotypes and battling misinformation?

**DYLAN BOYER:** That is the fight now in 2022. And biomedical advancements have come such a long way and science has come such a long way. But social stigma really still exists within the HIV community and into the public. I don't know any other diseases that have such a strong stigma that HIV does.

And I believe that it is rooted in homophobia, and transphobia, and racism. And that's why HIV is so stigmatized. And that's why communities and leaders need to step up, and to be there for one another, and let our folks living with HIV that they are OK, that they are loved, that they are valued.

Because isolation, and fear, and stigma is what keeps people going to the doctor. It's what keeps people in that state of thinking, I'm not worthy of this medication. And we really want folks to rise above that and let them know that they are worth living and their life is beautiful.

**CATHY WURZER:** Say, what's the Aliveness Project doing to mark World AIDS Day?

**DYLAN BOYER:** Yeah, so the Aliveness Project here today, today is World AIDS Day, and so our staff, and our volunteers, and our community are all wearing red ribbons today. It's a day for us to reflect on all the work that we've done for nearly 40 years and the work that we will still continue to do.

And then also to celebrate all of the people living with HIV today and to get some attention around World AIDS Day, we do this fun event on the weekend called the Red Undie Run, where we run across the Stone Arch Bridge in our red undies to raise awareness and attention about the impact that HIV still has in our community. And it's just a really fun and celebratory day where people living with HIV and people not living with HIV come together and just show the communities that they are loved.

**CATHY WURZER:** Yes, that would definitely attract attention, Dylan. Absolutely. Say, before I go, and I should have asked you this early on in our conversation, and I think people get it mixed up a little bit, and I should have asked earlier-- when's it appropriate to use the term AIDS versus HIV?

**DYLAN BOYER:** Yeah. So, really, AIDS is a symptom of HIV. So the appropriate term that we like to say that is not stigmatizing is people living with HIV. AIDS is really just a marker in somebody's journey that helps them understand the level of care that they need.

I think many of your listeners would understand that about t-cells. And so we're looking at somebody's t-cell count, anything that falls below a 200 t-cell count is when the diagnosis of AIDS appears on somebody's medical chart. And that just tells the doctors, and the providers, and the patients the level of care and attention that they may need.

It does not mean that they are sicker than people living with HIV. It does not mean that they are going to maybe die sooner than somebody living with HIV. People living with AIDS can also live a very long and healthy life. And I think that that's something that is really important for your listeners to understand-- that there is no difference between the two, other than how much care do we provide for this person.

**CATHY** Thank you so much for that. And thank you for the conversation, Dylan.

**WURZER:**

**DYLAN BOYER:** Thank you so much. It's been, like I said, a pleasure to speak with you. And thank you for highlighting the work of our community and people living with HIV. It really means a lot to us.

**CATHY** Absolutely. Thank you, Dylan. Dylan Boyer's been with us. He's the Director of Development at the Aliveness  
**WURZER:** Project in the Twin Cities.