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LOCAL

FSU awarded grant for 'mystery shopper' research to reduce HIV infections in young adults



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A nearly \$5 million grant to Florida State University's College of Medicine can possibly change the trajectory of young adults affected by the HIV epidemic, which remains a main health concern decades after the initial outbreaks in the U.S.

The National Institute of Mental Health gave the college a \$4.9 million grant as an investment in research that can potentially help decrease the increasing HIV infection rates seen in youth, starting with young men in the LGBTQ community.

Through the statewide project, researchers will focus on how to reduce HIV infections in young, gay men ages 18-29 by having them act as “mystery shoppers,” where they will go into HIV clinics to rate their experience and the services they were given.

“I've really wanted to do something with this mystery shopper approach,” said Sylvie Naar, an endowed professor in behavioral health at the College of Medicine and the director of FSU’s Center for Translational Behavioral Science. “Typically, what we were doing was we would have providers do role plays to assess their skills that way, but having a mystery shopper go into the actual clinic and rate services is so much more real-world.”

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Naar, who has been an FSU professor for five years, has been doing HIV research for almost 30 years and is one of the researchers who will be working on the project.

The rest of the research team includes Center for Translational Behavioral Science faculty members Iván Balán and Sara Gree, Professor of Public Health Maria Isa Fernandez from Nova Southeastern University, Professor of Nursing Jose Bauermeister from the University of Pennsylvania — where the mystery shoppers approach was developed — and research assistants who have been hired for the project.

"I think that sometimes, we tend to focus on the clinics and the organizations and what they're doing, but actually getting into the community and hearing what the youth who are living these experiences have to say is really exciting to me," said Kristina Feliciano, 25, an FSU graduate student and a peer navigator at the center who is a research assistant working on the initiative.

Community-centered approach to HIV research

By gathering information from the participants' perspectives, Naar and her research team hopes to improve training strategies for healthcare providers that will help young adults feel more comfortable about visiting testing sites and HIV clinics.

"This is a way of giving youth the platform for resources that are meant for them," said Florida A&M University senior Avery George, 23. While majoring in general health science at FAMU, George works closely with faculty and staff at the center as a youth outreach coordinator to inform Florida communities about the center's plans and efforts.

"I'm most excited to continue to learn about issues with existing resources and how youth see what the fix is versus going to a professional and asking them what their opinion is," he added.

The funded research is set to be over a five-year period and will open up to other demographics in the young adult age group if the project is successful.

"The approach puts the youth first, like front and center in terms of the assessment process," Naar said.

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From 2020 to 2021, HIV diagnoses in Florida have increased from 1,020 to 1,312 per 100,000 population among young adults ages 20-29, according to the Florida Department of Health. This includes an increase from 6 to 11 per 100,000 in Leon County and the highest number of diagnoses in Miami-Dade County with an increase from 138 to 187 per 100,000.

With the project focusing on young, gay men, Naar explained what makes them vulnerable to HIV infections.

"We know that it has a lot to do with stigma, and marginalization," Naar said. "A lot of times, these young people have had a lot of discrimination, trauma and lack of family support that makes them more susceptible to potentially catching these things, but also, not wanting to go in to get tested."

The project's participants, including individuals from Tallahassee, will visit the 42 Florida Department of Health HIV testing sites located in the seven counties in Florida with the highest HIV infection rates: Broward, Duval, Hillsborough, Miami-Dade, Orange, Palm Beach and Pinellas.

"It'll be challenging to find the shoppers and people that are willing to do this, so that's going to be our number one activity in the next few months to really pound the pavement," Naar said.

Participants will be found by reaching out to agencies across the state that provide services to young gay men. The center's research network called Scale It Up Florida will also be used to bring in participants since it focused on HIV and other sexual health issues in teens and young adults.

"I'm really excited to have a community-engaged process, and I'm excited to be able to improve services in hopes of ultimately improving the health of young people who have experienced minority stress and stigma," Naar said.

Following a six-month start-up phase that began in August, the research project will officially begin in February.

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This story is part of an occasional series of reports on research being conducted at Florida State and Florida A&M universities.

