

# Routine screening is key to fighting Florida HIV epidemic

The recent HIV outbreak in Indiana demonstrates that an apathetic approach to HIV testing and treatment can have devastating consequences. Saturday is National HIV Testing Day, when our country recognizes the importance of testing. Fittingly, just a few days later, a new HIV-testing law will go into effect in Florida.



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My View

Florida's new law gives practitioners the tools they need to prevent such an outbreak by helping to diagnose and treat HIV as early as possible. Thanks to a bevy of clinical trials, including the massive Strategic Timing of Anti-Retroviral Treatment (SMART) study, we now know for certain that early diagnosis and treatment are the key factors in both stopping the spread of HIV and improving health outcomes for HIV patients.

Earlier this month, Gov. Rick Scott signed House Bill 321, which modernizes Florida's testing law to allow health-care providers to incorporate HIV testing into their standard medical screening processes, without extra steps, unnecessary paperwork or other barriers.

Florida's HIV-testing laws have not kept up with technological and medical advances that could reduce these new transmissions. The laws were based on an outdated health-care model from a time when an HIV diagnosis was a death sentence. This old system offered HIV test-

ing based on factors such as sexual history or substance use (e.g. intravenous drug use), and forced health-care providers to make uncomfortable assumptions, which also reinforced the already-strong stigma attached to HIV. Many people would opt out of testing when a provider offered the test based on these assumptions.

We know now that routine HIV screening in all hospitals and community health centers is a proven way to reach the undiagnosed. With the routine HIV screening allowed by Florida's new law, all patients will be more likely to receive screening unless they specifically decline.

This change can't come soon enough. According to AIDSvu, in 2013 Florida had the most (5,364) newly diagnosed cases of HIV in the nation — higher even than California, which has nearly twice the population.

With the new law in place, Florida health-care providers will empower their patients to join the fight to end HIV in our state. It will also improve patient chances of getting the immediate, lifesaving care that is now available. HIV is no longer a death sentence, if diagnosed and treated early.

The Legislature and governor led the way for health-care facilities to make this vital change, but the new law does not immediately alter current procedures. It's up to Florida health-care institutions to take swift, decisive action to implement it.

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