



IN THE SPOTLIGHT



APLA's Community-Based Research Team Begins Groundbreaking Project in Lebanon

APLA will make its mark halfway around the world over the next five years with a groundbreaking new HIV research project in Beirut, Lebanon, that begins this summer.

While many in Los Angeles know about the client services APLA provides, our Community-Based Research (CBR) program is perhaps lesser known. CBR, however, is an important part of fulfilling our mission by studying HIV risk behavior and developing new evidence-based programs to support the health of people living with HIV. Most CBR projects develop locally, but this year CBR will also begin conducting overseas research that seeks to educate and empower people affected by HIV/AIDS around the world.

The Lebanon project is an expansion of Mpowerment, an intervention program in which APLA participates that provides education and prevention resources. It will serve Beirut's community of young men who have sex with men (YMSM), ages 18-29. Researchers will begin by collecting information on Beirut's gay community through peer ethnography, in which local residents will observe their own community and write field notes. Based on data collected, as well as surveys and focus groups, researchers will then implement programs for HIV education and prevention best suited to the community's specific needs.

A core element of these programs will be the development of a youth leadership council to guide the Mpowerment program and mentor new leaders for the local community. Finally, the researchers will analyze the effects of these programs within the community over the course of two years. If the program helps reduce the spread of HIV in Lebanon, it could be implemented in other parts of the region as well.

Mpowerment is one of the few HIV intervention studies ever conducted in the Middle East or North Africa—a region that currently has no substantial HIV prevention programs for YMSM. Muslim and Muslim-majority countries remain under-researched in the field of HIV prevention due to legal and religious restrictions, but changing cultural climates have helped the gay community in Beirut grow stronger and better organized in recent years. These changes have also coincided with increasing rates of new HIV infections among YMSM. "The study is important because gay men are organizing in Lebanon under very challenging conditions," CBR Program Manager Dr. Matt G. Mutchler notes. "Hopefully, what we do in Beirut will be impactful and have larger implications for neighboring regions."

CBR Senior Study Coordinator Bryce McDavitt, PhD, is confident that Mpowerment will have positive effects in Beirut based on what it has already accomplished in cities like Los Angeles. "When I think about what a difference programs like this have made in the lives of young gay and bisexual men here in the U.S., it makes me happy that through this project a culturally tailored version of it will now be available in Beirut," he says. "LGBT communities in Lebanon are in an important period of growth and expansion, and it's exciting to be a part of that process."

Global research is an important part of APLA's commitment to improving the lives of all people affected by HIV. "Gay communities are increasingly connected due to globalization and social media," Mutchler points out, stressing the importance of "personal and political connections with other gay men locally and throughout the world."

APLA's Community-Based Research program is funded in part by the National Institute of Mental Health and National Institute on Drug Abuse, and operates in collaboration with RAND Corporation; UCLA; Harvard University; California State University, Dominguez Hills; University of California, San Francisco; and others. For more information, contact Matt G. Mutchler, PhD, at 213.201.1522 or mmutchler@apla.org.

NEWS & NOTEWORTHY



Pride in What We Do

June is not only the official start of summer, it's also Pride month, which made me take a moment to think a bit about what pride means—and what we're proud of at APLA and APLA Health & Wellness.

First and foremost, we had the pleasure of being a part of both Long Beach Pride and [Christopher Street West / LA Pride](#). Pride festivals and parades remind us how important—and liberating—it is to celebrate who we are, no matter what our orientation, sex, or gender identity. On an organizational level it's also a special time for us because we get to talk with the community about the work we do. This year in particular was great because we joined other organizations in showing support for access to PrEP as an HIV prevention tool—something now being backed [by the L.A. County Board of Supervisors](#). Our sincere thanks to all of you who came

out to march with us or say hello.

As you'll see from the stories and interviews in this edition of *Optimist*, we also take great pride in the breadth of our services and programs we are able to offer everyone, regardless of their HIV status. As part of our ongoing expansion of care through APLA Health & Wellness, we recently hired a [new PrEP navigator](#) who is helping educate people about this important new HIV prevention method and get them access to the medicine. In addition, our [community-based research](#) team is going international with an important new HIV prevention study in the Middle East.

These are things we're proud of, of course, but pride is not simply saying to ourselves, "We did a good job" and stopping there. It's a cumulative thing—a result of working hard, making sure what we're doing is having a positive impact, and continuing to improve and strive for more. Pride is a group effort. Together, we make great things happen and we are strong. We loved feeling that at our recent celebrations, and we'll keep it with us as we move forward.

We wish you all have a safe and happy summer and hope you'll join us for AIDS Walk in the fall. Registration is already open at [la.aidswalk.net!](#)

With gratitude,

Vallerie D. Wagner
Chief Operating Officer
APLA Health & Wellness



Getting to Know ... Treatment Education

Changing the Lives of Those Living With HIV Through Learning

An integral part of APLA's client services—but an area many people who are not clients may not know about—is treatment education, which teaches people about HIV medications and how they keep them healthy.

Program Director Octavio Vallejo, MD, MPH, oversees the department, bringing with him many years of experience in the medical field, including working for the Pacific AIDS Education and Training Center at UCLA, as well as with Gilead Sciences as a medical science liaison. We recently talked with Octavio about what he does and how it positively impacts the lives of APLA's clients.

Tell us a little about what treatment education is.

Treatment education provides HIV-positive clients information about HIV infection, including how the virus interacts with the immune system, how medications work, how to adhere to medications, how to manage side effects, and how they can live with HIV and maintain a good quality of life.

For a person to get HIV medications to work they must take them in the right way, with the proper adherence. From my perspective working in this field for more than 25 years, when an individual understands the process, that knowledge gives them power. It helps them regain control of something that is very scary at the beginning.

What's been one of the highlights for you in your current role?

I remember a case of an HIV-positive, heterosexual, young Latino man who had been in the ER for a long time. He was being treated for different situations, but never for HIV. When I met him he was suffering from a skin condition as a reaction to the medications he was on and was looking for info on one of the medications. He wasn't seeking treatment education; he just wanted a pamphlet about the medication. So I talked to him and recommended that he get a second opinion. We got him into a new clinic and in a matter of three months he was a completely different person. The regimen that this doctor gave him was unusual, but the knowledge and experience she had brought him back to life. He was one of the first cases that I enrolled in this program, and then I enrolled him in a study so we continued to work together to follow his success. Now he's studying to

be a nurse. At APLA we work together: We wrapped him around with everything he needed—benefits, treatment education, food, et cetera. We have an impact on somebody's life for the better.

For more information about the Treatment Education program, visit [our website](#), or send Octavio an email at ovallejo@apla.org.



National HIV Testing Day Is June 27th

Knowledge is power. Know your status. APLA Health & Wellness offers free rapid HIV testing in two locations. Visit aplahw.org for more information.



Employee Spotlight: PrEP'd for the Future

APLAHW's PrEP Navigator Ken Almanza Talks About His Important New Role

Earlier this year, [APLA Health & Wellness](#) proudly announced the expansion of the [Pendleton/Goldman PrEP Program](#) with the addition of its first PrEP navigator, Ken Almanza.

Ken started in his new role in April 2015, after previously working as an outreach specialist with APLAHW's Party Wise crystal methamphetamine program. As PrEP navigator, he works on site at the Gleicher/Chen Health Center (GCHC) in Baldwin Hills, where he meets one-on-one with patients interested in PrEP, or pre-exposure prophylaxis, a method of prevention that reduces

the risk of HIV transmission by up to 99% when the medicine is taken as prescribed.

In addition to speaking with patients about Truvada—currently the only drug approved for use as PrEP—Ken assists them with health insurance enrollment and follows up with them to make sure they keep their medical appointments for follow-ups and to refill prescriptions.

Despite recent advances, road blocks remain in education about and access to PrEP, especially among younger MSM and transgender women of color. "A surprising number of HIV-negative people still don't know much about PrEP," Ken says. "My goal is to help our patients better understand the basic information so they can decide if it's right for them and to have them meet with a provider. It's a first step for many people in taking care of their overall health."

The Pendleton/Goldman PrEP Program launched in fall 2014 at the Gleicher/Chen Health Center. The program was developed in part thanks to generous support from Brian Pendleton and Chad Goldman.

To learn more about PrEP and the services offered through APLA Health & Wellness, visit aplahw.org/prep.

PARTNER PROFILE



L.A. Care Helps Ensure a Healthy Future for Los Angeles

APLA Health & Wellness' mission includes bringing culturally competent medical, dental, and behavioral health care services to underserved populations in Los Angeles, with a focus on the LGBT community. One of our key partners in this endeavor is L.A. Care Health Plan.

In addition to providing health coverage to Angelenos, L.A. Care also assists organizations such as APLAHW through a variety of grants. L.A. Care funds were instrumental in the build-out of the dental facilities at the Gleicher/Chen Health Center in Baldwin Hills, providing APLAHW with resources to purchase equipment and renovation of the space.

"The Affordable Care Act and expansion of Medicaid means that many people who have not had health care now do, and many are LGBT adults and persons with HIV," Roland Palencia (pictured), Community Benefit Programs Director for L.A. Care, says. "There are many LGBT staff and allies here at L.A. Care who want to make sure these communities are served."

Palencia has a long history with APLA and APLA Health & Wellness: In 1983, he volunteered to translate one of APLA's first brochures from English to Spanish. The early days of the epidemic severely impacted his personal circle of friends and colleagues, and he remains a committed advocate in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

He has now worked with L.A. Care for over eight years, and in his current role oversees the distributions of grants to local partners, ensuring that everyone has access to the care they need. "A lot has been accomplished, but there's still much to be done," Palencia notes. "One of the challenges is educating providers, many of whom don't know a lot about LGBT health care—and that is why our partnership with APLA is key in making sure that culturally competent and high quality of care is accessible to those most in need."

PICTURE IT

From marching through West Hollywood to bidding on amazing works of art, it's been a busy couple of months! Get a look at all the fantastic photos from our recent fundraisers and community events and be sure to join us at another one soon!



[31st Annual S.T.A.G.E.](#)



[5th Annual Art Project Los Angeles](#)



[45th Annual CSW/L.A. Pride](#)

SAVE THE DATES



trans
pride 2015
LOS ANGELES

Friday & Saturday, June 19 & 20

Trans Pride L.A. June 19-20

Come celebrate the vibrancy and individuality of Los Angeles' trans and genderqueer community.

RSVP on [Facebook](#).



Red Circle Project Celebrating All Life and Creation Pow Wow June 20

The Red Circle Project is bringing together community members from diverse backgrounds to recognize National Native HIV/AIDS Awareness Day.

RSVP on [Facebook](#).



HIVmatters
Countdown to a Cure:
California Leads the Way

HIV Matters Forum July 30

Join us on for a town hall meeting at Plummer Park in West Hollywood about California's role in finding a cure for HIV.

apla.org/hivmatters

AIDS Walk October 11

Get ready for our biggest event of the year! Team up with over 20,000 others and walk to end AIDS.

[Get started with your fundraising now!](#)



We need you to volunteer with APLA!

For more information, contact Jim Williams, our Volunteer Resources program manager, at jwilliams@apla.org or 213.201.1379.