On International Workers' Day, Let's Talk About Economic Empowerment for People With HIV
Coalition Issues Call for Obama's Top HIV/AIDS Leader to Take Action for Employment Justice

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May 1, 2014 - May 1, International Workers' Day (or "May Day"), is a powerful occasion to acknowledge worldwide struggles for workers' rights. This year, three coalitions of people living with HIV and allies with a collective membership of nearly 20,000 people -- the HIV Prevention Justice Alliance (HIV PJA), National Working Positive Coalition (NWPC) and Positive Women’s Network - USA (PWN - USA) -- are uniting to uphold employment rights and support genuine economic empowerment by and for people living with HIV.

Releasing a compelling infographic and campaign outline at www.preventionjustice.org/work, they are urging individuals and organizations to join them to help realize their goals. They are also calling on Douglas Brooks, incoming director of the White House Office of National AIDS Policy, to demand that his office take immediate action to follow through on the employment-related promises of the National HIV/AIDS Strategy.

"HIV disproportionately impacts people who are economically marginalized," says Mark Misrok, board president of NWPC, "including people of color, LGBTQ people and/or people who’ve experienced incarceration -- and having HIV can itself be economically marginalizing." Individuals may face workplace barriers that affect many people with complicated or chronic health conditions -- in addition to discrimination or bias from coworkers and employers. An NWPC survey showed that 63% of over 2,500 HIV-positive respondents were working at the time of their diagnosis; only 32% reported being employed at the point of completing the survey. "Employment and employment services must be available as few can emerge from poverty without work earnings," Misrok adds.

"In addition to financial benefits, employment is an important arena of social engagement in our society, creating social bonds, raising self-esteem and reducing isolation," says Vanessa Johnson, creator of Common Threads, an innovative project that promotes economic empowerment for women with HIV. "Employment has been shown to improve HIV health and prevention outcomes. Being able to work can be good for a person’s health!"

Before implementation of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), thousands of people with HIV had to keep their income very low to avoid getting kicked off public programs that covered the costs of expensive HIV treatment, care and services such as housing support. "People living with HIV have often been incentivized to work less, and stay poor, to keep the benefits that help them stay healthy and in care," says Teresa Sullivan, a PWN-USA leader based in Philadelphia. Now, many more people are eligible for expanded Medicaid programs, or to purchase insurance through the state or federal exchanges. In addition, the ACA makes it illegal to turn down anyone from insurance coverage due to pre-existing conditions, meaning that more people with HIV can access commercial insurance (including plans subsidized under ACA).

"Many more people living with HIV can now afford to work, but current HIV community resources lack capacity and knowledge to assist people in considering, starting, returning to or being further trained for work," says Suraj Madoori, coordinator of the HIV PJA. "We need a strong, coordinated effort to ensure that every person living with HIV, and every HIV service provider, is equipped and supported to make well-informed decisions about employment and economic opportunities. We invite people living with HIV and providers to join us in changing the conversation -- and the policies -- of the HIV community from poverty to income, and from economic instability to security and independence!"

Get more information and support the campaign at www.preventionjustice.org/work