

Racial disparities in treatment worsen HIV crisis

'In essence,' expert says, 'if we end HIV for Black communities, we end it for Atlanta.'

By Michael Scaturro
Special to the AJC

like Miami, Memphis, and Atlanta — and extremely high HIV rates."

When Leisha McKinley-Beach saw the recent CDC data showing that metro Atlanta had the third-highest HIV rates in the nation, she wasn't surprised. The numbers have been high for years, and the burden hasn't been spread equally among all Atlantans.

"When we look at new HIV diagnoses in metro Atlanta, 74% are among Black people," McKinley-Beach, a national HIV consultant and CEO of the Black Public Health Academy, told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. "In essence, if we end HIV for Black communities, we end it for Atlanta. That's a significant story that's not being told."

HIV experts interviewed by the AJC said that until at-risk populations are folded into health insurance programs, Georgia will have a hard time ending what has become an entirely preventable epidemic — preventable because low-cost drugs can stop HIV-negative people from catching the virus, and HIV-positive people from passing it on.

"The larger political context matters," Justin C. Smith, who directs the Campaign to End AIDS at Positive Impact Health Centers in the Atlanta area, told the AJC. "We know Medicaid matters a great deal for the effective provision of medical services. The fact that Georgia is still refusing to expand Medicaid harms us. There's a correlation between the locations that have not expanded Medicaid — I'm thinking of cities

Because Georgia has not accepted a full expansion of Medicaid, it has left more people in the state without insurance, making it hard to organize care for those with chronic conditions like HIV.

Only Miami and Memphis outrank Atlanta in terms of new HIV infections, according to CDC data. The common thread between all three cities, Smith emphasized, is that Georgia, Florida and Tennessee have not expanded Medicaid.

Nationwide, Black and Hispanic males accounted for most of the new infections, and half of new HIV infections among women were in Black women, the CDC said.

The CDC data is all the more unsettling because there are drugs that can completely stop HIV transmission. The drugs are known by the shorthand "PrEP," for pre-exposure prophylaxis, and can be prescribed to people of any sexual orientation or gender. Taken orally or intravenously, the drugs reduce the risk of contracting HIV through sexual contact by more than 99%, making them more effective than any other measure to prevent HIV, including condoms, according to the CDC.

PrEP uptake in the United States

Though the U.S. was the first nation to approve PrEP, in 2012, many countries are doing a better job ensuring equitable access. That's mostly because of the cost of laboratory tests and medical visits, which would be



CDC data showed that metro Atlanta has the third-highest HIV rates in the nation. Educational pamphlets about sexually transmitted diseases are available at the Empowerment Resource Center in downtown Atlanta. NATRICE MILLER/AJC FILE

covered by insurance. While the cost of the generic form of Truvada, an oral form of PrEP, can be as low as about \$30 a month in the U.S., a study by University of Virginia researchers reported that the cost of starting PrEP typically is about \$2,670 for uninsured patients, including about \$1,000 for lab tests and medical visits.

It's possible to take PrEP on-demand as a precaution before engaging in condomless sex. But most people opt to take PrEP every day and, in that case, are scheduled for quarterly bloodwork and STI screenings. That's why activists are driving home the point that providing people with health insurance is

crucial to reducing Atlanta's frustratingly high HIV rate.

PrEP uptake in the U.S. remains notably unequal: about 94% of white people who could benefit from PrEP have been prescribed it, but only 13% of Black and 24% of Hispanic people who could benefit have been prescribed PrEP, according to HIV.gov.

Moreover, the U.S. is lagging behind Western Europe and some nations in Africa in overall HIV treatment and prevention. PrEP pills and quarterly blood work are free for people in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, plus some European Union nations, including France, Germany, Sweden and Denmark.

In Atlanta, 60.2% of people living with HIV have achieved viral suppression from taking their medications, versus 66% nationwide, according to the U.S. government website HIV.gov. In the UK, 98% of HIV-positive people have attained viral suppression or "undetectable" status, meaning they cannot transmit the virus to anyone else.

Several African nations have outpaced the U.S. too. Botswana, Eswatini (formerly Swaziland), Rwanda, Tanzania and Zimbabwe have already achieved the United Nations' "95-95-95" targets set for 2025 — 95% of people with HIV know their HIV status, 95% of people with

diagnosed HIV infection receive sustained antiretroviral therapy, and 95% of people receiving antiretroviral therapy have achieved viral suppression.

Expanding access

One solution to broaden access could be injectable forms of HIV medications given in a medical setting, said Daniel Driffin, a leading expert on HIV in Georgia and the founder of THRIVE SS, a nonprofit that works to "support Black, same-gender-loving men living with HIV" in metro Atlanta. An injectable HIV medication, Apretude, was approved in 2021 by the

HIV continued on A12

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NEWS

DOW JONES INDUSTRIALS

Closing figures for Monday, April 15, 2024

Table with 3 columns: Company, Volume (000), 4 p.m. \$ change. Lists major stocks like Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, etc.

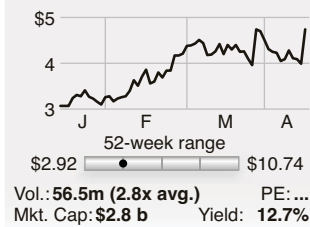
Dow 37735.11 -248.13 Year to date +1.2% Nasdaq 15885.02 -290.08 Year to date +5.82%

OTHER STOCK INDEXES

Table with 3 columns: Index, 4 p.m. Change, Change. Lists indices like S&P 500, Dow Jones, etc.

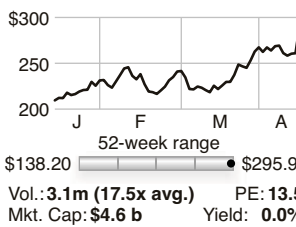
Medial Properties Trust

Close: \$4.74 ▲0.75 or 18.8%. The health care facilities owner is selling a majority interest in five Utah hospitals for about \$1.1 billion.



Encore Wire

Close: \$291.23 ▲30.25 or 11.6%. Phrysmian is buying the copper wire maker.

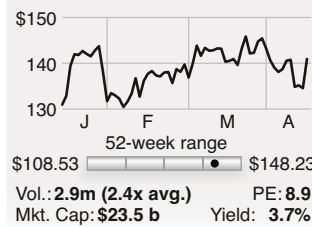


HOW STOCKS FARED

U.S. stocks slumped after higher yields in the bond market cranked up the pressure on Wall Street. The S&P 500 fell 1.2% Monday.

M&T Bank

Close: \$140.94 ▲6.38 or 4.7%. The bank's first-quarter earnings beat analysts' forecasts.



GEORGIA STOCKS COMPANIES BASED HERE

Large table listing Georgia-based stocks with columns for Volume, 4 p.m. \$ change, and company names.

Georgia connection

Companies with a large presence here and of local interest

NEW YORK STOCK EXCHANGE

Table with columns: % change, Close, High, Low, Advanced, Declined, Total issues, Up vol (00s), Down vol (00s), Total vol (00s).

15 MOST ACTIVE

Table listing 15 most active stocks with volume and price changes.

15 BIGGEST GAINERS

Table listing 15 biggest gainers with volume and price changes.

15 BIGGEST LOSERS

Table listing 15 biggest losers with volume and price changes.

NASDAQ STOCK MARKET

Table with columns: % change, Close, High, Low, Advanced, Declined, Total issues, Up vol (00s), Down vol (00s), Total vol (00s).

15 MOST ACTIVE

Table listing 15 most active NASDAQ stocks.

15 BIGGEST GAINERS

Table listing 15 biggest gainers on NASDAQ.

15 BIGGEST LOSERS

Table listing 15 biggest losers on NASDAQ.

INTEREST RATES

Treasury Bill annualized rate on weekly average basis, yield adjusted for constant maturity, 1-year: 5.00

COMMODITIES

Table listing commodity prices for Gold, Silver, Oil, Platinum, etc.

MORNINGSTAR'S TOP MUTUAL FUNDS

Large table listing Morningstar's top mutual funds with columns for Fund, NAV, Chg, %Retn.

LABOR

Eateries hiring virtual workers from overseas

Person taking your order in N.Y. could be in Philippines.

By Stefanos Chen c. The New York Times 2024

NEW YORK — At Sansan Chicken in Long Island City, the cashier beamed a wide smile and recommended the fried chicken sandwich.

Or maybe she suggested the tonkatsu — it was hard to tell, because the internet connection from her home in the Philippines was spotty.

Romy, who declined to give her last name, is one of 12 virtual assistants greeting customers at a handful of restaurants in New York City, from halfway across the world.

The virtual hosts could be the vanguard of a rapidly changing restaurant industry, as small-business owners seek relief from rising commercial rents and high inflation.

Workers are paid \$3 an hour, according to their management company, while the minimum wage in the city is \$16.

The workers, all based in the Philippines and projected onto flat-screen monitors via Zoom, are summoned when an often unwitting customer approaches.

But skeptical customers said they were not eager to join this particular Zoom meeting.

"You hear 'hello' and you say, 'What the hell is that?'"

Shania Ortiz, 25, recalled of a recent trip to Sansan Ramen, a neighboring Japanese restaurant that had a gold-framed, flat-screen monitor set up in the foyer with a surveillance camera trained on guests.

"I never engage," Ortiz said.

The service is the brainchild of Chi Zhang, 34, founder of Happy Cashier, a virtual-assistant company that was thrust into the spotlight when a social media post about the overseas workers went viral.

He was caught off-guard. The program has been quietly tested since October,



A delivery driver interacts with a remote cashier at an outlet of Yaso Kitchen, a soup dumpling spot, in New York. A handful of New York City restaurants are experimenting with virtual staff members...

but the company's website has not yet been set up. The technology is already available in stores in Queens, Manhattan and Jersey City, New Jersey, including at Sansan Ramen; its sister store, Sansan Chicken; and Yaso Kitchen, a Chinese soup dumpling spot.

Zhang is a former owner of Yaso Tangbao, a Shanghai-style restaurant in Brooklyn that closed during the pandemic. He said the experience reinforced the idea that restaurants were being squeezed by high rents and inflation.

When the virtual assistants are not helping customers, they coordinate food delivery orders, take phone calls and oversee the restaurants' online review pages, Zhang said.

The workers are employees of Happy Cashier, not the restaurants. Zhang said their \$3-an-hour wage was roughly double what similar roles paid in the Philippines.

Tipping policy is set by the restaurants, he said, with one giving its virtual greeters 30% of the pooled total each day.

The restaurant industry has long been an entry point for immigrants, and a hotbed for labor violations such as wage theft.

But the Happy Cashier model is legal and minimum wage laws extend only to workers "who are physically present within the state's geographical limits," according to a spokesperson for the New York State Department of Labor.

Zhang said he expected to quickly scale up by placing virtual assistants in more than 100 restaurants in the state by the end of the year.

The prospect is alarming, said Teófilo Reyes, chief of staff at Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, a nonprofit labor group that has pushed for a higher minimum wage in New York.

"The fact that they have found a way to outsource work to another country is extremely troubling, because it's going to dramatically put downward pressure on wages in the industry," he said.

Fast-food restaurants in New York City had an average of 8.5 employees in 2022, he said, down from 9.23 in 2019, before the pandemic.

At the Sansan Chicken in Manhattan's East Village, Rosy Tang, 30, a manager, praised the service.

"This is a way for small businesses to survive," she said, adding that the cost and space savings it provided could allow her to add a small coffee stall to the store.

In practice, however, quirks with the model abound. At the Sansan Chicken in Queens, the virtual assistant couldn't help a reporter order a sandwich without cheese on a touch-pad menu.

Will Jiang, 30, an associate at Goldman Sachs, had lunch at the Yaso Kitchen in Jersey City — and completely ignored his virtual host, Amber.

"I thought it was some advertisement," like the pre-recorded videos in taxicabs, he said.

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Candace King, a customer, reacts to a remote cashier at an outlet of the Sansan Ramen restaurant in New York. The service is the brainchild of Chi Zhang, founder of Happy Cashier, a virtual-assistant company that was thrust into the spotlight when a social media post went viral.

HIV

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FDA for use as PrEP, but its high cost remains a barrier to access.

"We are seeing amazing data on long-acting treatment for persons living with HIV," Driffin told the AJC. "There are still barriers to care, such as poor transportation infrastructure and stable access to housing for people living with HIV. But injectables can reduce unnecessary burdens."

Driffin has been on injectable treatment for more than two years.

"During the pandemic, when I started to see my adherence to my daily medication change, I wanted to avoid having virus in my system," he said. "That led me to asking my physician, who is also a gay, Black man who lives in Atlanta, about other options."

A study released in March showed that an ultra-long-

acting form of Apretude, known as cabotegravir, could eventually be administered three times a year for PrEP.

And this, ultimately, could address issues with adherence to HIV medications, otherwise known as "pill fatigue." Many people living with HIV can expect to live as long as their peers who do not have HIV — a miracle scenario unthinkable just two decades ago.

But the pills sometimes cause actual sluggishness in some people, or psychological fatigue in others who, as they age, may tire of taking several prescription drugs daily.

Helping heterosexual Black women access injectable PrEP and PrEP pills will be a crucial part of ending HIV in Georgia, McKinley-Beach said: "The goal is for every Black Georgian who can benefit from PrEP to have a pathway to getting PrEP. It's a new way of thinking about HIV in this state."

One way to broaden access, especially in rural

Georgia, would be to allow pharmacists to prescribe PrEP. McKinley-Beach said laws that permit this in California, Colorado, Nevada and Utah could serve as a template for Georgia.

"Having pharmacists prescribe PrEP would be a game changer," she said.

Despite the high numbers, Atlanta is broadening outreach efforts to queer communities of color. In March, Atlanta's NAESM's Total Life Care Center opened a clinic targeted specifically at Black gay and bisexual men.

The city's sexual health leaders also have succeeded in breaking down taboos around talking openly about HIV.

"The reduction in stigma is a win for Atlanta," Tori Cooper of Human Rights Campaign told the AJC.

"Education in mass media has helped. But we still need to drive home the message to lawmakers that it's not just cheaper, but ethical, to prevent new infections."