

Hyacinth, New Jersey's First HIV Service Provider, Celebrates 40 Years

A gala fundraiser for Hyacinth AIDS Foundation honored HIV advocates and celebs. It's not too late to show support and donate funds for the New Jersey organization!

November 8, 2025 By [Trent Straube](#)

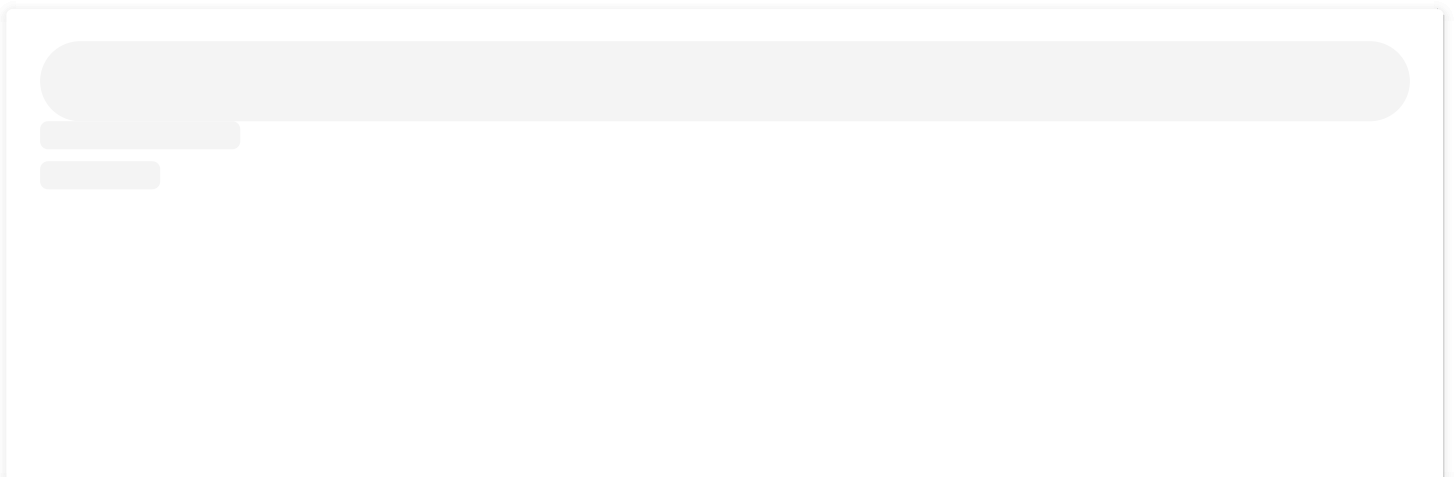
[Hyacinth AIDS Foundation](#) first opened its doors in New Jersey in 1985, during the darkest and earliest days of the [HIV epidemic](#). Those doors remain open today, and last week the HIV service provider marked that milestone with a 40th anniversary blowout celebration and silent auction in Short Hills, [New Jersey](#).

The Hyacinth gala also issued a call to action and resilience.

"We will not relive the 1980s," executive director Kathy Ahearn O'Brien, declared from the stage. "We will fight to keep our doors open for another 40 years. We will keep pushing forward for every client, every advocate, every person who deserves to live free from stigma and fear." Her message earned a standing ovation.

Over 200 guests, including celebrities, lawmakers, advocates, board members (from across the country) and other community members, showed support of Hyacinth's lifesaving services and the dedicated folks who provide them—and those who rely on them.

The gala included an auction and fundraiser—which has been extended so you can participate in it virtually until November 30.





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The Hyacinth celebration also shined a spotlight on advocates and supporters who represent the organization's courage and commitment to justice:

- Dominique Jackson received the Riki Jacobs Social Justice Award. Known for playing Elektra Abundance Evangelista on the TV series Pose, Jackson is also an author, ballroom icon and outspoken advocate for the transgender and immigrant community. At the gala, she delivered a passionate reflection on visibility and the ongoing struggle for equality.
- New Jersey State Assembly member Shanique Speight received a Hyacinth Award. Her leadership in securing significant state funding was instrumental in strengthening Hyacinth's programs. Assemblywoman Speight spoke about the importance of investing in communities that too often go unseen and unheard.
- Public health leader Ketlen Baptiste Alsbrook received a Hyacinth Award. She is the director of Newark's Department of Health and Community Wellness and executive director of the Mary Eliza Mahoney Health Center. Hyacinth recognized Baptiste Alsbrook for her transformative leadership in public health and her tireless pursuit of equity for Newark's most vulnerable residents.

- Peter Jewell received the Deloris Dockrey Community Advocate Award. Hyacinth honored his lifelong commitment to advocacy, both for the LGBTQ+ community and for people living with HIV.

From left: LGBTQ media activist Cathy Renna; transgender advocate, actress and ballroom icon Dominique Jackson; and Hyacinth executive director Kathy Ahearn O'Brien at Hyacinth AIDS Foundation's 40th anniversary gala in Short Hills, N.J. *Courtesy of dMdc Photography*

Throughout the evening, Hyacinth also highlighted the voices of those who live and work on the front lines of care. The gala's Paddle Raise segment offered guests an intimate look at the impact of Hyacinth's programs through the stories of four community members and staff:

- Axel Torres Marrero spoke about the organization's work in public policy and the importance of safeguarding access to life-saving services.
- Jayden Jackson shared a deeply personal account of how Hyacinth's housing program and GBM services help find stability and hope.

- Nytasha McCaskill described how harm reduction efforts continue to save lives by meeting people where they are.
- Ariana Rodriguez shared how Hyacinth's outreach particularly through its connection to the ballroom community has transformed fear into empowerment for those hesitant to seek testing or care. Together, their stories captured the essence of Hyacinth's impact: dignity, compassion, and action in motion.

But the celebration and fundraising don't stop with the end of the gala. Hyacinth extended the virtual Paddle Raise donations and silent auction until November 30. You can make an impact by donating to specific topics such as advocacy, housing, stigma, identity and equality.

What's more, you still have time bid on select items, including two tickets to see Sting in concert November 15 at the Borgata; a two-night stay at the Coquí del Mar Guesthouse in San Juan, Puerto Rico; a Tom of Finland holiday blanket (just look at it and you'll feel warmer!); a family portrait that includes a stay at a luxury hotel in New York City or Miami by Bradford Portraits; and an eight-week pottery class at Mud Clay Studio in Montclair. [Visit their page on Classy.org for more.](#)



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According to Hyacinth.org, the organization maintains eight offices in seven cities: Jersey City, Paterson, Plainfield, Trenton, New Brunswick, Newark and West New York. Hyacinth employs over 100 people and works with more than 75 volunteers.

Together, they offer a wide range of lifesaving care, treatment and prevention services, including case management, incarcerated discharge planning, housing, psychological support, car services, advocacy, fundraising, pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) to prevent HIV and much more.



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