One Way to Beat HIV? Make PrEP Free. Kamala Harris Wants to Do Just That

But the presidential hopeful gets some criticism from a prominent AIDS activist: “Your plan is a great start but missed the bullseye.”

June 20, 2019 By Caroline Tien

Democratic presidential candidate Senator Kamala Harris unveiled a plan to prevent the spread of HIV by greatly increasing access to PrEP. As in make it available for free, with no co-pays or other costs.

Details of the plan, reports Politico, include:

- Requiring insurance plans, both public and private, to completely cover the cost of PrEP and any tests related to it
- Creating a grant program that would assist states, territories or tribes in making PrEP available to people who lack insurance
- Requiring the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to work with advocacy groups for LGBT people and people of color to raise awareness of PrEP
- Making it illegal for life insurance companies, disability insurance companies and long-term care insurance companies to charge PrEP users higher premiums

When taken daily as prescribed, Truvada as PrEP, or pre-exposure prophylaxis, reduces the risk of contracting HIV by 99% or more among men who have sex with men (MSM) and 90% or more among women. (The risk reduction for women may very well be greater than 90%, but currently available research is insufficient to refine the estimate.) PrEP also reduces the risk of contracting HIV via use of contaminated needles by more than 70%.

Huge thanks to @KamalaHarris for caring about PrEP access. BUT, note to presidential candidates - please talk to PrEP activists BEFORE you announce your PrEP plans. Harris's staff let her down on this, ... /1 https://t.co/gFm4HgTjoz

— Peter Staley (@peterstaley) June 20, 2019

After Harris announced the PrEP plan, AIDS activist Peter Staley took to Twitter to thank the U.S. senator from California for supporting HIV prevention—and to offer a bit of constructive criticism to the POTUS hopeful. "Note to presidential candidates," he writes, "please talk to PrEP activists BEFORE you announce your PrEP Plans."

In a series of tweets, Staley then educates Harris and her staff on what he sees as relevant PrEP topics. Your plan, he writes, "is a great start but missed the mark. You're asking everyone to keep paying $2K/ month for a drug that costs $8 a month in Australia." (You can read the series of tweets by clicking on the one above.)

Harris, who will be the nation's first female president and second president of color if she wins the November 2020 general election, devised the policy in response to what she saw as flaws in the American health care system that "put PrEP out of reach for…many," including a "lack of insurance coverage" and "exorbitant costs."

"Nearly four decades since the beginning of the HIV/AIDS crisis that took so many lives and caused countless others to live in fear," Harris said in a statement released through her office, "we can and will stop the spread of this disease."

Although the cost of a monthly supply of Truvada can exceed $1,600, insurance covers the med and Gilead Sciences, the drug's manufacturer, offers co-pay cards.

In fact, earlier this month, the U.S. Preventive Services task Force gave Truvada as PrEP a Grad A recommendation, meaning that insurance providers must cover it. For more, read "Great News! Expert Panel Recommends PrEP for HIV Prevention."

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