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Practicum Report

United for Justice: Advancing the Movement for HIV Criminalization Reform and Decriminalization

Practicum Overview

As part of the PWN-USA Policy Fellowship, I developed a practicum project documenting best practices from the *Ladies First on the Frontlines for Justice 2-Day Conference*, an HIV criminalization reform and decriminalization initiative designed to educate, engage, and mobilize advocates across state lines.

The conference focused on increasing awareness of the impact of HIV criminalization laws on individuals and communities while creating opportunities for collaboration between advocates in Maryland and New York. The project sought to capture the planning process, resources, challenges, successes, and lessons learned to create a practical roadmap for advocates interested in organizing similar educational and advocacy events.

Background

Ladies First on the Frontlines for Justice is a women-led advocacy initiative focused on HIV criminalization reform and decriminalization. The initiative centers the experiences of women living with HIV and other directly impacted communities, using education, storytelling, community engagement, and policy advocacy to advance reform efforts.

HIV criminalization laws continue to contribute to stigma, misinformation, and discrimination against people living with HIV. These laws often disproportionately impact marginalized communities and can discourage testing, disclosure, and engagement in care. This project was designed to support community education and strengthen advocacy efforts aimed at reforming these harmful laws.

Conference Structure

The conference was held over two days using a hybrid format.

Day One: Virtual Panel Discussion

The first day featured a virtual panel discussion focused on:

- HIV criminalization laws in Maryland and New York

- Current decriminalization efforts
- Legal perspectives
- Lived experiences of people impacted by criminalization
- Advocacy strategies for reform

Day Two: In-Person Convening

The second day was held at the New York City LGBT Center and included:

- Opening remarks
- Keynote presentation
- Expert panel discussions
- Community dialogue
- Networking opportunities
- Strategy discussions focused on advancing decriminalization efforts

Resources and Partnerships

A critical component of the project's success was securing funding and building partnerships.

The Health Not Prisons Collective awarded up to \$7,500 to support education and awareness efforts related to HIV criminalization, decriminalization, and broader issues of criminalization within the HIV community. Funds were distributed through The Sero Project, which served as the fiscal sponsor for the U.S. PLHIV Caucus.

Additional resources included:

- Virtual meeting technology
- Event venue space
- Community partnerships
- Advocacy organizations
- Subject matter experts
- Individuals with lived experience
- Marketing and outreach materials

Community Engagement Strategies

The conference intentionally centered the voices of people directly impacted by HIV criminalization laws. Storytelling was used as a key advocacy tool to connect policy issues with real-life experiences.

Community engagement strategies included:

- Lived experience panels

- Interactive dialogue
- Cross-state collaboration
- Community-centered messaging
- Opportunities for networking and relationship building

Challenges and Lessons Learned

One challenge encountered during this practicum was limited access to some conference documentation due to changes in communication with a former collaborator. While this created gaps in available records, sufficient materials were obtained to move the project forward.

Several important lessons emerged from this experience:

- Document all planning processes and event materials.
- Establish shared systems for record keeping and file management.
- Build partnerships early in the planning process.
- Center lived experience throughout advocacy efforts.
- Remain flexible and adaptable when challenges arise.
- Use both virtual and in-person engagement strategies to increase accessibility and participation.

Outcomes

The conference successfully:

- Increased awareness of HIV criminalization laws.
- Strengthened relationships between advocates in Maryland and New York.
- Elevated the voices of people living with HIV.
- Promoted dialogue around decriminalization and policy reform.
- Created a framework that can be adapted by advocates planning similar initiatives.

Conclusion

This practicum provided an opportunity to document and evaluate a community-driven advocacy initiative focused on HIV criminalization reform. By capturing best practices, resources, lessons learned, and advocacy strategies, this project contributes to ongoing efforts to educate communities, build coalitions, and advance HIV decriminalization nationwide.

The resulting best practices guide, and presentation are intended to serve as practical tools for advocates seeking to organize effective, community-centered events that support policy change and social justice for people living with HIV.