

New community advisory board, Project Fierce, led by young women of color highlights the worsening STD epidemic and the need for more resources to address inequities in sexual health services.

August 17, 2021, South Los Angeles – While the coronavirus pandemic justifiably continues to receive worthy attention, there remains another ongoing public health burden in LA County (LAC) affecting youth—particularly young people of color—that is silently getting worse: sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Left untreated, STDs can leave a lasting impact on an entire generation—causing infertility, pregnancy complications, cervical cancer, pelvic inflammatory disease, birth defects, and an up to 5-fold increased risk of HIV transmission.¹

“Our fight to end COVID-19 shines a bright light on the ongoing crises that have only worsened as a result of the economic and health pandemic we are facing—this includes the spread of STDs that has increased among vulnerable populations throughout LA County,” says Los Angeles County Supervisor Holly J. Mitchell. “We need every person and resource to help keep our communities healthy.”

WeCanStopSTDsLA has worked towards reducing STDs among youth and young adults since 2012 when the coalition formed in response to disproportionately high STD cases among African American and Latinx youth and young adults in South LA. Late last year, the coalition of individuals and organizations who live, play, work, serve and worship in South LA and other areas of LAC launched Project Fierce and a new community advisory board (CAB) of nine women of color ages 18-24 years of age. The CAB will join forces with other community members, community service organizations and local public leaders to advocate for increased resources to address this epidemic.

Supervisor Holly J. Mitchell adds, “This advisory board will bring invaluable insights to help address the unique challenges women and communities of color face in stopping the spread of STDs.”

CAB members are working together to help raise their voices and sound the alarm about the critical interventions and measures needed to address and reduce the high number of cases of STDs among young women of color and others in LAC. Formed in part because of a significant lack of resources and community-based approaches to reduce STDs, including HIV, Project Fierce hopes to expose the dire need for more service and systems-change interventions for young cis and transgender women of color in LAC.

“As young women of color in Los Angeles we face adversity as a result of our race, gender identity, and socioeconomic status, which have severely impacted our access to STD and HIV prevention, testing, and treatment along with our access to research and resources by young women of color for women of color.” – CAB member, Lucia Torrez Espinoza

The data clearly indicates that STDs, **including HIV disproportionately affect marginalized communities**—driven largely by **social determinants of health**. In LAC, multiple social determinants of health drive the local STD and HIV epidemics, including structural racism, intersecting oppressions, incarceration, homelessness, discrimination, poverty, and lack of access to culturally appropriate services.^{2,3} Unfortunately, the COVID pandemic has exacerbated these existing barriers to care, resulting in limited screening, diagnosis and treatment opportunities, and potentially leading to ongoing STD transmission,

¹ National Coalition of STD Directors handout, https://www.ncsddc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/STD-101_NCSDD-STD-Handout-1.3-DIGITAL-1.pdf

² http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/CenterForHealthEquity/PDF/Factsheet_STD.pdf

³ http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/dhsp/Reports/STD/2018_LosAngelesCounty_STD_Snapshot.pdf

especially for Black and Latinx young people.

“Where marginalized populations intersect, the burden of health inequities exponentially grows,” says Dr. Barbara Ferrer, Director of LA County’s Department of Public Health. “For many population groups including people of color, LGBTQ populations, immigrant populations, people with disabilities, and others, these inequities create barriers and difficulties navigating systems of care.”

Although the CAB represents a new community-based effort, WeCanStopSTDsLA recognizes the need to further leverage and realign additional resources.

“The ongoing levels of high cases of chlamydia and gonorrhea—now compounded by the growing congenital syphilis epidemic gripping women of color; women of child bearing age and newborn children—present an opportunity to address multiple overlapping oppressions and their resulting health inequities,” says Valerie Coachman-Moore, Coachman Moore & Associates, Inc, “We are now reassessing where we’ve been and reframing our focus to prioritize and support communities most in need, especially in light of the COVID pandemic. Project Fierce and the young women in the CAB are one set of resources.”

Project Fierce is led by partners Coachman Moore & Associates, Inc., Children's Hospital Los Angeles and fiscal agent Community Health Councils. Inc. As a foundational partner and funder, the LA County Department of Public Health’s Division of HIV and STD Programs continues to anchor this new effort along with support from the Center for Health Equity, the LA County Commission on HIV and Essential Access Health.

“Everyone in the CAB is a little activist in the making, united around this concerning public health crisis affecting young women of color. We are all fiercely committed to raising awareness around health justice and equity to reduce the impact of STDs on our community.” – CAB member, Sharmin Shanur

About the three lead partners:

Coachman Moore & Associates Inc. (CMA) is an organizational and community development consulting firm founded in 1987 by Valerie Coachman-Moore, MPH. CMA engages individuals and organizations in participatory, strategic, action-oriented solution-driven processes to bring about transformative change at the individual, community and systems levels. Since 2013, CMA has served as the convener and backbone organization for the WeCanStopSTDsLA coalition.

Children’s Hospital Los Angeles (CHLA) has extensive experience recruiting, training and managing CABs for young people (YCABs). This process included training the CAB on SDH; conducting a prioritization activity to identify SDH and resiliency factors that were most salient to their community; and envisioning how the resiliency factors could be leveraged to address the selected SDH.

Community Health Councils (CHC) has been at the forefront of systems change work to eliminate disparities in health and well-being since 1992, including the key areas of Health Systems and Community and Economic Resiliency. CHC also uses its Social Change Institute as a vehicle for incubating and accelerating strategies that contribute to its vision of building Better Communities for All People.

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