



Ponce Center- Joining Hearts Emergency Assistance Fund

The Infectious Diseases Program (IDP) of Atlanta's Grady Health System serves as the largest public HIV clinic in the United States. Often called the Ponce Center due to its location in Midtown on Ponce de Leon Avenue, the center is the medical home – including primary care, dental, mental health and oncology – to over 5,000 HIV+ patients in the Atlanta area every year. Grady's Ponce Center is on the front line of the HIV epidemic in Atlanta, however it rarely receives private support from the community for their programs while most of their healthcare is paid for by grants from the federal Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program, there are still needs that grants do not meet.

Barriers to Enter Care

In order for a patient to qualify for care under the Ryan White Program – whether at Ponce or any other clinic - they must demonstrate financial need and provide certain documentation including proof of residency and a state-issued ID. While many of us might take having a driver's license and proof of residency for granted, there are many people, especially young adults, who do not readily have this documentation available. Proving residency is difficult when one doesn't have a stable residence. Obtaining a Georgia ID card requires traveling to the DMV and producing documents including a certified copy of one's birth certificate. The process for obtaining a birth certificate varies state by state, but can take several weeks and can cost as much as \$40.

Without this personal documentation, new patients cannot see a physician and cannot begin life-saving anti-retroviral drug therapy. This issue can be a significant barrier to care for many people with HIV and is not specifically covered by federal grants. A new patient may have to wait 6-8 weeks before qualifying for care.

Patient Referral Process

The Ponce Center's Women and Families unit has approximately 700 patients enrolled. Their clients include HIV+ women with children and young HIV+ people under the age of 25. Young men who have sex with men and transwomen make up a sizeable portion of this group. Assisting the medical staff is a team of social workers and educators working to keep these patients in care. Many of these patients have significant issues in their lives in addition to HIV. This team connects patients to other agencies and services to assist them in stabilizing the other issues – such as homelessness or substance abuse – so that the patients can appropriately address their healthcare needs.

The social work team works closely with agencies across the area to help meet the needs of their patients. A patient might be referred to Living Room for housing assistance or Project Open Hand for meal assistance. While these referrals are evidence of the comprehensive, patient-centered program at the Ponce Center, there is a gap with the system. It takes time to complete those referrals and get services in place. Even with assistance navigating the process from the social workers, help is often not immediate.

Program Support

The Ponce Center proposes to establish the Joining Hearts Emergency Assistance Fund providing direct support for patients having difficulty with the qualification process to begin care and to provide basic necessities to bridge the service gap during referrals to outside service agencies. The Center requests a grant of \$5,000 to pilot the program for one year.

The purpose of the Joining Hearts Emergency Assistance Fund is to cover costs as a last resort for necessary items not obtainable through other means that support a patient to begin or remain in care.

There are two focus areas for the Joining Hearts Emergency Assistance Grants – qualification to get into care and referral gaps – and both will be administered by the social work team, led by Shellie Bigelow, MSW and Melissa Beaupierre and Grady Health Foundation.

Qualification support can include fees to pay for Georgia ID cards and the supporting documents needed to obtain those IDs. It can also include transportation (Marta or gas cards) to obtain these documents.

Bridging service gaps can include diapers and baby formula, short term food supply, basic clothing and toiletries, Marta/gas cards for transportation to clinic and other items deemed necessary by social workers.

Strategic Grants for Greatest Impact

The case workers and educators working directly with patients are the best judge of where the limited funds can do the most good. Due to federal grant reporting requirements, each patient's record of missed appointments and other indicators of compliance to their care are tracked. Because of this, there is already a system in place to help hold patients and staff accountable and can clearly identify the most impactful use of these limited funds. Once patient information is removed, data can be shared with Joining Hearts as part of a review process of the program.

Connecting HIV+ Georgians to health care and keeping them in care is one of the greatest challenges in our fight against HIV. The issues keeping patients out of care are complicated, wide-ranging and are often unique to each patient. Five dollars for an ID card may seem insignificant to many of us, but can be a fortune to someone young, confused and in desperate need of the services the Ponce Center provides. These are real-world barriers to providing care to those in the greatest need of care. These small grants, when targeted strategically on a case by case basis, can make an outsized impact on the eventual outcome for many patients. The return on such a small investment will be immense.

For more information on the program, please contact Melissa Beaupierre 404-616-6230.