



## 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 was the medical home – including primary care, dental, mental health and oncology – to over 6,000 HIV+ patients in the Atlanta area in 2016. 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.

The Ponce Center's Women and Families unit has approximately 2,300 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, a patient navigator and a health educator working to keep these patients in care.

### **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 continue care including 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.

In summer of 2016, the Ponce Center began a new "Rapid Enrollment Process" for all new patients. Labs are taken during the first visit and an appointment with a physician within 72 hours is scheduled. Prior to this new program, a new patient may have had to wait 6-8 weeks before qualifying for care. Under this new program, new patients will begin care, are assigned a "Presumptive" Ryan White eligibility status and then have up to 30 days to provide the qualifying documentation in order to continue care. However, they cannot continue after 30 days without these documents.

Thanks to increased HIV testing in Grady's emergency department and neighborhood clinics we are seeing an increase in people linked to the Ponce Center who have acute HIV infection. Acute infection means they could have been infected just weeks earlier and the virus is multiplying in their body at an aggressive rate, wreaking havoc on their immune system and making them extremely infectious. Starting people with acute infection on HIV medication as soon as possible is critical. A new component of support in this request is funding to allow the Ponce Center to keep a supply of anti-retroviral (ARVs)

packs on hand so patients presenting with acute HIV infection do not have to wait even one additional day to begin treatment.

### **Program Support**

**Thanks to the generous support provided by Joining Hearts in 2016, a Joining Hearts Emergency Assistance Fund was created in conjunction with the Rapid Enrollment Process. This provides direct support for patients having difficulty with the qualification process to begin and remain in care and has also supported patients who fell out of care and are returning to re-enroll at the Ponce Center. As a new component in 2017 to address the need for ARVs for people with acute HIV infection, funding for several 1-2 week ARV packs is also being requested. The Center requests a grant of \$7,500 to continue the program within the Rapid Enrollment Process and support for re-enrolling patients for another year (\$5,000) and to fund a small supply of ARV packs (\$2,500) for patients with acute HIV infection.**

The focus area for the Joining Hearts Emergency Assistance Grants is the process of qualification to get into care. The grants will be administered by Melissa Beaupierre, Ponce's Project Director for Ryan White Part D (Women, Infants, Children and Youth) and the Grady Health Foundation. The Center will also be responsible for quarterly updates to the Joining Hearts Board of Directors on fund usage.

Qualification support will 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 and gift cards for patients to obtain essentials like food, clothing, and personal hygiene items.

### **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 will be shared with Joining Hearts as part of a review process of the program. Systems were established with the initial funding in 2016 so direct support to patients would begin immediately with the 2017 funding. Almost 300 patients were provided support through the Joining Hearts fund from May 2016 – Apr 2017.

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. 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.