

**L**ewis and Clark Public Health is expanding mobile health services to those who need it most: those suffering from addiction and mental health conditions — and resulting homelessness and housing insecurity.

We are hitting the road — taking test kits, vaccines, mental health services and resources to our neighbors most vulnerable to diseases like HIV, syphilis, hepatitis C and more.

The treatment for HIV/AIDS, and treatment of people with HIV/AIDS, has changed dramatically since I was a girl. This is a wonderful thing.

Born in the early '80s and a schoolgirl in the '90s, I was raised on AIDS hysteria. When the AIDS crisis began in 1981, it was an unknown deadly disease and people were right to be scared. The cause of AIDS, HIV (human immunodeficiency virus), didn't even have a name until 1986.

Schools became the battleground for misinformation and discrimination. As a schoolgirl during that time, I remember the murmurs in the hallway. It was rumored that AIDS could be passed through a sneeze or by sharing a water fountain. Conspiracy theories flourished. Homophobia was rampant. Parents were outraged by the idea of their kids sharing a classroom with AIDS-infected children.

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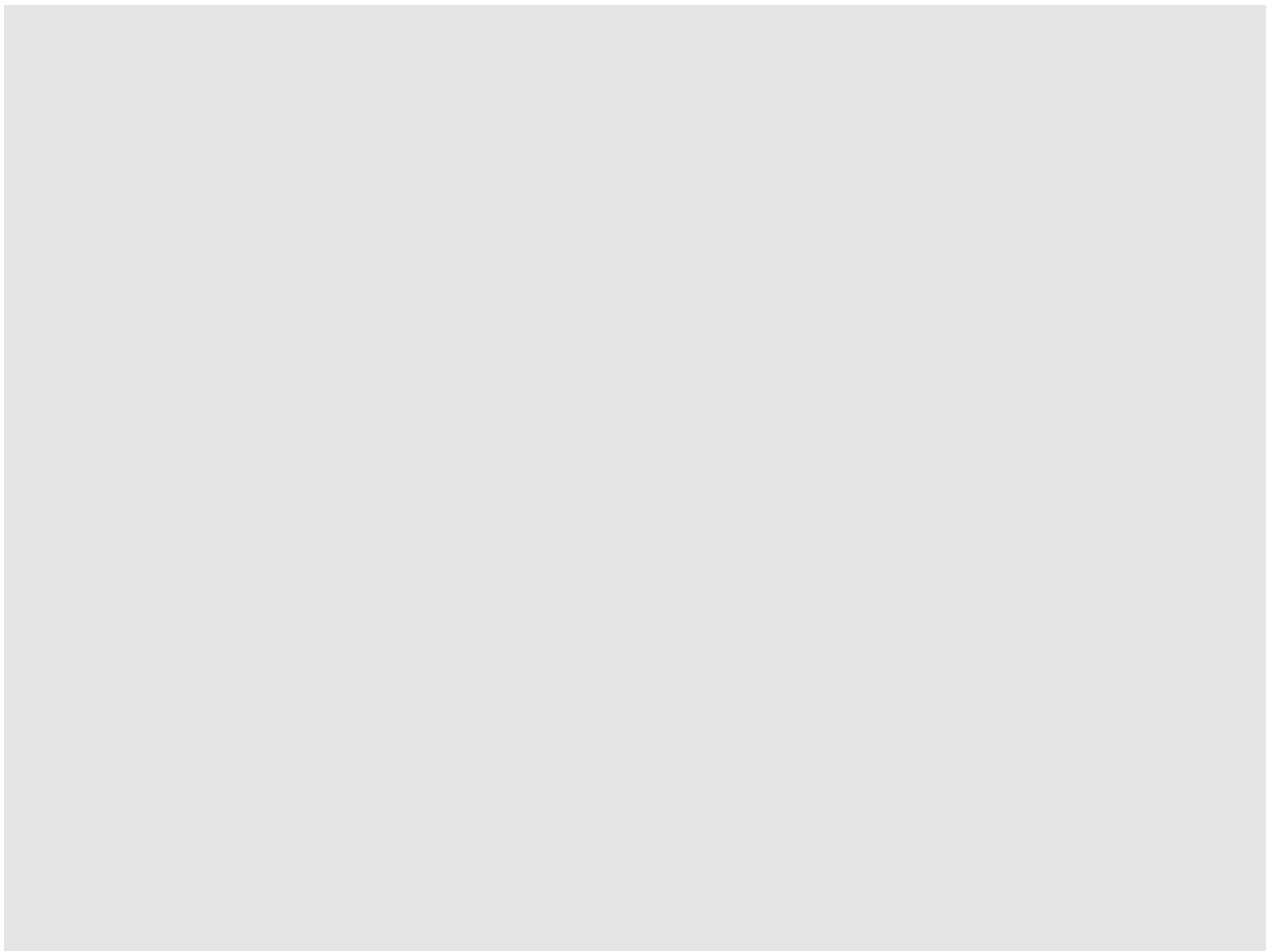
Ryan White was one of those children. A schoolboy with hemophilia, he contracted HIV/AIDS through a routine blood transfusion. After capitulating to parental pressure, the local school board barred Ryan from the classroom in Indiana. So he and his parents took that school board to court, and they eventually won.

Despite constant harassment and threats against his life, White was a rock star. He campaigned tirelessly against HIV/AIDS misinformation and discrimination. He also rubbed elbows and shared water fountains with presidents and sports stars and raised money for HIV/AIDS research and treatment.

Ryan White died from AIDS in 1990, age 18, one month before his high school graduation. Yet his legacy lives on.

But here's the cold hard truth. As Americans, a predominately white country, we became comfortable with Ryan White and sympathetic to his plight. He was, after all, white. Not to mention middle class. He was a sick boy who inherited AIDS from a blood transfusion, not from intravenous drug use or sex, gay or otherwise. Blameless. Nothing about him makes us uncomfortable or judgmental, just sad and compassionate. Hence why he was the perfect "poster child."

But add sexuality, race, addiction and socio-economic status to the mix and that compassion is short-lived or completely withheld. Suddenly, people deserve what they get. A mortal punishment. A just desert. They reap what they sow. Never mind the inborn social determinants of health that drive people into drugs or prostitution rather than drive them to the doctor's office – poverty, violence, discrimination, lack of education; the list could go on.



Lewis and Clark Public Health is expanding mobile health services.

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Years before the AIDS crisis seized national attention, intravenous drug users on the streets of New York City were dying from “junkie pneumonia,” now identified as early AIDS cases. At the same time, funding for public health in New York was being drastically cut, shutting down assistance programs and laying off thousands of community health workers. So these addicts often died nameless, slipping through the cracks of a society who didn’t want to see them. Few cared why they died; at least it was one less person sleeping on their streets.

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Public health truly is a bottom-up phenomenon. Ignore the plight of the poor and the marginalized, and it is only a matter of time before their problems come knocking on our door. And when they do, we are quick to point the finger and blame them, rather

than take a long and hard look in the mirror and accept responsibility for our collective negligence and greed.

We cannot talk about population health without talking about health disparities and health equity. We cannot talk about diseases like HIV/AIDS or syphilis without also talking about sexuality, race, addiction and money – the things “polite” society would rather not discuss over dinner, or any mealtime, snack time, or teatime for that matter.

To quote the singular Maya Angelou, “If it is true that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, isn't it also true a society is only as healthy as its sickest citizen and only as wealthy as its most deprived?”

And that is why our dedicated community health professionals are hitting the road, visiting shelters and housing projects, rural communities, as well as block parties and community events. Our mobile services are available to anyone and everyone who wants them.

If you see the Lewis and Clark Public Health mobile van out and about, come and talk with us. We'd love to tell you about the things we are doing and provide you resources and ideas about how you can get involved in local organizations and nonprofits that are working to care for the sick, the unsheltered and the marginalized. Community solutions require community participation.

(Not to mention, our STI testing is one of the most affordable options in town.

#gettested)