Why Are Only 891 People Enrolled in a Free PrEP Program for 200,000?

Hint: Gilead Sciences donated the meds for Trump's HIV prevention program, so that cost isn't the issue.

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Only 891 people are enrolled in a federal program meant to provide free HIV prevention meds to 200,000 participants, Bloomberg Law reports. The numbers were discussed during a virtual meeting of the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS (PACHA).

The prevention program is part of a national initiative President Trump launched last year titled "Ending the HIV Epidemic: A Plan for America." The initiative's goal is to lower HIV rates nationwide by 75% in five years and by 90% in 10 years. One way it aims to achieve this is by getting more people at risk for HIV to enroll in a plan that provides pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP).

PrEP refers to the daily tablet HIV-negative people can take to protect themselves against the virus. Scientists estimate PrEP to be about 99% effective among men who have sex with men and greater than the current 88% to 90% estimate for heterosexual men and women. (For more details, see "How Well Do U=U and PrEP Work? The CDC Updates Its Answers.") Currently, the Food and Drug Administration has approved two versions of PrEP: Truvada and Descovy; both consist of two meds, and both tablets are manufactured by Gilead Sciences. (For more details, see "What's the Difference Between Truvada and Descovy for PrEP?")

Gilead has donated enough Truvada to the federal HIV prevention program—titled "Ready, Set, PrEP"—to provide 200,000 people with the med for a maximum of 11 years, Bloomberg reports. So why aren't more people taking advantage of it?

One reason is that federal and health care resources are currently being devoted to the COVID-19 crisis. "Some of the increased in-person recruitment, education and awareness efforts for the 'Ready, Set, PrEP (RSP)' campaign have slowed [because of the coronavirus]," Mia Heck, a spokesperson for the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), said in a statement.

PACHA cochair Carl Schmid cited another barrier for some participants. A Truvada prescription requires lab tests, and these aren't free under the federal PrEP program. Federal guidelines recommend people on PrEP be tested every three months for HIV as well as for sexually

transmitted infections.

When HHS announced “Ready, Set, PrEP” last December, AIDS activists criticized the federal government for paying money to Gilead for meds when it could be covering the cost of labs and clinic visits instead. (For more, read “People Without Insurance Can Get Free PrEP.”)

In more recent POZ news, Texas Health Action teamed up with telemedicine portals to provide PrEP without visits to the doctor. For more on that, read “MISTR and SISTR Help Deliver HIV Prevention PrEP to Texans’ Doorsteps.”

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