

# Linkage to Care (L2C) Program

Providing Individualized, Long-Term, One-on-One Support for Central Indiana's Highest Needs Clients Living with HIV

**SINCE THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THIS PROGRAM, WE'VE SEEN OUR PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS' VIRAL LOADS DECREASE 91-93%**



## Background

The stages of HIV care, also known as the HIV care continuum, demonstrate significant gaps in HIV services, and efforts are underway at the federal, state, and local levels to develop and implement strategies to improve health outcomes for people living with HIV (PLWH). The HIV care continuum can be described by the following sequential steps: (1) diagnosis of HIV infection, (2) linkage to care, (3) retention in care, (4) receipt of antiretroviral therapy (ART), and (5) achievement of viral suppression (a very low level of HIV in the body). In the United States, there are 1.2 million people living with HIV, and according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 66% have been linked to HIV-specific medical care.<sup>1</sup> Engagement in care is a critical step in ensuring access to highly effective HIV treatment, which can ultimately lead to viral suppression. Viral suppression results in significantly improved health outcomes as well as dramatically decreased likelihood of HIV transmission (96% reduced risk of transmission).<sup>2</sup> According to the CDC, 30% of people living with HIV had achieved viral suppression, which means that only 3 out of 10 people living with HIV had the virus under control. Barriers to engagement in care include lack of stable housing, poverty, mental health and substance use issues, lack of access to culturally competent care, transportation, and other competing needs; interventions to engage people in HIV care must address these needs at the point of engagement in care as well as in subsequent support for retention in care. Improvements along the HIV continuum of care hold great promise for both treatment as well as prevention.



## What Are We Doing?

The Damien Center's Linkage to Care (L2C) Program fills the gap between available medical and supportive services by providing individualized, long-term, one-on-one support for central Indiana's highest needs clients living with HIV. Research shows that this kind of support is exactly what clients need in order to successfully manage their health. For clients who have multiple and compounding barriers to successfully entering into or maintaining HIV care, L2C Specialists collaborate with clients to create customized care plans tailored to the unique and specific needs of each participant, addressing and eliminating each of their barriers to HIV care. L2C Specialists provide myriad services including but not limited to: phone and text support, transportation to and from all medical and supportive service appointments, daily reminder calls to assist with medication adherence, assistance in navigating local (e.g. accessing local clothing and furniture banks) and federal (e.g. applying for TANF or Social Security Disability benefits) resources, and coaching clients to become their

### CLIENT STORY

*When one of our L2C Specialists reached out to "Cheryl"\*<sup>1</sup>, she'd had a 7 year lapse in HIV medical care — the result of a negative experience with a medical provider in another state where her confidentiality had been breached — and while she'd known it was important for her to resume medical care, it had simply not been a priority. With the support of her Linkage Specialist, Cheryl learned to reprioritize her health care and gain the skills to disclose her HIV status to her teenage children. She received 18 months of support from L2C, including phone and text support, transportation to and from appointments, assistance in building a natural support system, and help in accessing stable housing and attaining gainful employment. Within only 6 months of the program, Cheryl went from a viral load of over 1 million to undetectable. "Linkage to Care has changed my life. I hope others can experience the love and care that I've experienced," said Cheryl, a successful graduate of the Linkage to Care Program.*

*\*Cheryl is a pseudonym for a client at The Damien Center.*

<sup>1</sup> "HIV/AIDS Care Continuum." AIDS.gov. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 6 Mar. 2015. Web. 11 May 2015.

<sup>2</sup> "Prevention Benefits of HIV Treatment." Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2013. Web. 11 May 2015.

## UNIQUE FEATURES OF THE L2C PROGRAM

- ▶ *Diagnosis:* Strong partnerships were built with multiple HIV testing locations throughout central Indiana, each with a unique protocol in place to ensure successful entrance into HIV medical care for all people newly diagnosed. L2C Specialists are on-call **24 hours a day, 7 days a week**, and are immediately dispatched to meet with any person newly diagnosed in the greater Indianapolis area.
- ▶ *Linking to Care:* L2C Specialists provide people with a new HIV diagnosis ongoing phone, text, and face-to-face support until the client successfully engages in HIV case management and medical care. L2C Specialists meet with clients in the community, **wherever the client is most comfortable**, to provide emotional support, answer questions about diagnosis, treatment, and disclosure, and help clients get prepared for their HIV case management and medical intake appointments. L2C Specialists provide similar services for clients who are struggling to maintain successfully in HIV medical care, through **identification of barriers** to care and systematic elimination of said barriers through increased and individualized support.
- ▶ *Engaged or Retained in Care:* L2C Specialists use a **client-centered approach** to develop an individualized plan of care that addresses each client's specific needs and barriers, and builds on their strengths, skills, and natural supports. L2C Specialists provide **up to 18 months of support** with each client to attain self-sufficiency and successfully maintain HIV medical care.
- ▶ *Prescribed Antiretroviral Therapy:* L2C Specialists **provide transportation** to/from all HIV medical and supportive service appointments, and daily reminder calls for medication adherence. If elected, L2C Specialists attend medical appointments with clients to help **decrease fear**, act as health advocates, and to model behavior (such as providing comprehensive medical history and requesting doctors to decrease use of medical jargon).
- ▶ *Achieved Viral Suppression:* Throughout the 18-month intervention, clients work with L2C Specialists to **attain self-sufficiency**. During the 3-year pilot project, most L2C clients attained viral suppression within 6 months of the program, meaning they had a very low level of HIV in their blood, thereby decreasing their ability to pass the virus to others.

own health advocates. L2C Specialists work closely with HIV non-medical and medical case managers, Infectious Disease Providers, mental health providers, housing case managers, and other providers, acting as an advocate and bridge between provider and client.

## Initial Trends of the L2C Program

Since the implementation of this program, we've seen a percentage decrease across program participants of 91–93% in viral loads and a percentage increase across program participants of 17% in CD4 count.

## Culturally-Specific Services through the L2C Program

In an attempt to address health disparities and engage the diverse clientele impacted by HIV in a culturally competent manner, The Damien Center partners with Brother's United (a local agency that serves mainly Black men who have sex with men and the transgender community), Women in Motion (a local agency mainly focused on health education for women of color), and Indiana Latino Institute (a local agency that seeks to improve health and education outcomes for the Latino community).

## Agency Overview

The Damien Center's mission is "to lead the fight to prevent the spread of HIV and to empower persons in central Indiana affected by HIV/AIDS to move forward each day with dignity." As Indiana's oldest and largest HIV/AIDS Service Organization, since 1987, The Damien Center has been offering life-saving and life-changing support to those affected by and living with HIV, particularly serving clients in the greater Indianapolis area, including all of Marion County and surrounding counties. In 2014, we served 1,191 clients through HIV case management, provided 2,623 HIV tests, and saw remarkable outcomes from our new on-site medical clinic, a service that makes us a uniquely full-service agency that provides preventive, supportive, and medical services all in one place. All of our in-house services — counseling, medical and non-medical case management, HIV testing and prevention, housing assistance, food pantry, emergency financial assistance, linkage to care, and more — are provided completely free of charge to our community. The overall goals of the agency are to reduce HIV incidence and provide the necessary tools to assist people living with HIV to achieve viral suppression (the amount of HIV in their blood), ultimately leading to an improvement in both individual and community health outcomes.



## PROGRAM CONTACT

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