



April 20, 2022

RE: HB22-1267

Dear Members of the Health & Human Services Committee,

Colorado Access is a local, nonprofit health plan with decades of experience connecting low-income individuals and families with health care in Colorado. Our mission is to partner with communities and empower people through access to quality, equitable, and affordable care. Our more than 600,000 members receive health care as part of CHP+ and Health First Colorado. We are the state's largest and most experienced Medicaid health plan.

Colorado Access strongly supports HB22-1267, Culturally Relevant Training Health Professionals. We believe that a qualified, diverse, and culturally responsive health care workforce is essential to meeting the needs of our diverse membership and achieving health equity goals. By funding a culturally relevant and affirming health-care training grant program, HB22-1267 creates a meaningful and needed investment in improving the health of people of color, the LGBTQ community, immigrants, people with disabilities, and other priority populations.

In support of these goals, Colorado Access has already implemented training programs to help our network of providers deliver culturally responsive health care. Current opportunities offered through Colorado Access include:

- Our Community of Practice, which is comprised of large healthcare systems and their leaders responsible for the implementation of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion principles. This Community of Practice is gathering best practices and exchanging resources to address culturally relevant and affirming healthcare training.
- The Colorado Access Health Equity Task Force brings together community-based partners to identify best practices and share innovations that address health disparities in our communities.
- We are addressing social determinants of health through a digital outreach campaign to our members as part of an effort to inform our provider network of potential barriers to healthcare access.
- Our comprehensive Learning Management System provides on-demand training to our provider network with access to module-based trainings on Culturally Responsive Care.
- An ongoing learning series on services available for immigrants and refugees offered to our Care Management team, as well as Department of Human Services staff including case workers.

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HB22-1267 will further expand the training opportunities available to health care professionals in Colorado, and complement our existing efforts to improve the care delivered to our members. We support HB22-1267 as an important step toward better equipping health care professionals in providing equitable, safe and respectful care. Thank you to Senators Fields and Ginal and Representatives Boesenecker and Valdez for sponsoring this important legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G. McGinnis', written in a cursive style.

Gretchen McGinnis, MSPH
Sr. Vice President of Healthcare Systems and Accountable Care
Colorado Access



To: Senator Rhonda Fields, Chair Senate Health and Human Services Committee
Members, Senate Health and Human Services Committee

From: Olivia Haloj, Director of Prevention Services, Vivent Health

Re: Support for HB22-1267 Relating to Culturally Relevant Training for Health Professionals

Vivent Health is honored to take this opportunity to submit testimony regarding HB22-1267, concerning culturally relevant training available to healthcare professionals. We support this legislation and believe it will address a critical barrier to care for Coloradans living with HIV and communities disproportionately impacted by the HIV epidemic in our state. By establishing a state grant program to develop culturally responsive and affirming healthcare training programs for providers, HB22-1267 will help ensure that all Coloradans can access the high-quality care that they deserve. ***Vivent Health urges the committee to pass HB22-1267 and help bring Colorado one step closer to ending the HIV epidemic and other health disparities in our state.***

Vivent Health is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization, founded on the combined expertise of AIDS Resource Center of Wisconsin, Rocky Mountain CARES, St. Louis Effort to AIDS and AIDS Services of Austin. Together, we are working towards a world without AIDS and are committed to being a respectful, caring partner serving everyone affected by HIV through our unique, state of the art, holistic care model, which provides access to medical, dental, and mental health care; clinical and traditional pharmacy services; food pantry and nutrition services; housing assistance; legal aid; and care management and coordination services for people living with HIV. Vivent Health also provides prevention services, including Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) screening, navigation to treatment and retention in care, point of care testing, education, harm reduction and mobile syringe access to help reduce the transmission of HIV. All the services under the Prevention Program are free and all other services in Vivent are available to people we serve, irrespective of their ability to pay for them, or their insurance status. We serve more than 2,100 Coloradans affected by HIV each year, primarily in the Denver and Pueblo areas.

Revolutionary advancements in the field of HIV have made it possible for people living with HIV to live full and healthy lives. The quest towards ending the epidemic of HIV

needs us to first ensure that all people living with HIV receive unhindered access to lifelong treatment and keep their viral load suppressed to prevent transmission. It is also essential that people at risk for HIV receive access to testing, counseling, harm reduction services like sterile syringes, safer sex kits, risk reduction materials like condoms and lubes, and most importantly PrEP to prevent contracting HIV.

One of the most important HIV-related clinical indicators is viral suppression, also known as achieving an “undetectable viral load” or “being undetectable.” Viral suppression occurs when the level of the virus in a person’s blood is too low to be detected through traditional means, and results from effective and consistent HIV treatment. Viral suppression not only leads to healthy immune system function and overall improved wellbeing for people living with HIV, but also results in an inability for that person to transmit HIV to others - scientifically validated and CDC endorsed phenomenon known as “Undetectable = Untransmittable. Achieving viral suppression is thus not only a critical personal health outcome for people living with HIV, but also a key HIV prevention strategy.

In addition to ensuring people with HIV can achieve an undetectable viral load, increasing the number of people at-risk for HIV who are able to access HIV prevention programs, especially PrEP, is also critical to ending HIV as a pandemic. PrEP is the use of medications used to treat HIV disease to prevent the acquisition of the virus by people who are exposed to it. PrEP is more than 99% effective at preventing HIV transmission from sex, and at least 74% effective at preventing HIV transmission among people who inject drugs.

Today, there are more than 15,000 people living with HIV in Colorado, with approximately 400 new cases of HIV diagnosed annually. The Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment recently initiated a statewide program to train medical providers and staff, especially those who provide MAT or recovery services, on how to provide HIV and PrEP care. The program was successful in improving access to care for people living with HIV or at risk of HIV in rural areas, where providers who specialize in HIV are often scarce or, in more remote counties, nonexistent.

During the COVID pandemic, many medical and behavioral health providers worked on building a strong telehealth system to continue seeing and treating patients,

successfully addressing barriers of transportation and social distancing. But even with these and other recent advances in the field of HIV, inequitable health outcomes continue to haunt communities of color, LGBTQ Coloradans, and people who inject drugs. Significant HIV-related disparities exist between Black or other people of color and their white counterparts, leading to delayed diagnosis and enrollment in care. More than 16% of all cumulative HIV diagnoses in Colorado have been associated with injection drug use, and people living with HIV who inject drugs are less likely to be linked to prevention and harm reduction services, medical care or stay engaged in the continuum of care long term.

Our outreach staff often come across patients and clients of color, especially from the LGBTQ community, who are reluctant to seek HIV or PrEP care because of lack of representative providers who understand them and empathetically cater to their needs. There is unfortunately an overall sense of distrust towards health care providers that can only be mitigated with providers becoming better educated about cultural humility when offering care and counseling to people living with HIV or at risk of HIV.

On the frontlines of our daily outreach work we hear from participants in our syringe access program how past painful experiences with medical providers have kept them from seeking care or have forced them to fall out of care due to fear of being judged, humiliated, misunderstood, disrespected, and dismissed based on their sexual orientation. Addressing the social determinants of health like poverty, food insecurity, housing instability, racism, unemployment etc.; normalizing testing and treatment for HIV; debunking myths and reducing stigma associated with HIV; and actively engaging health care providers caring for this vulnerable population in practicing culturally responsiveness is key to developing and fostering trust with marginalized and disenfranchised community members.

Every day at Vivent Health we witness how providing culturally responsive and affirming care leads to better health outcomes. More than 96% of our Colorado patients living with HIV are achieving viral suppression and as we consciously continue our quest to eliminate racial disparities in viral suppression rates among our patients. Our patients also report excellent dental, mental health, and other health outcomes that contribute to overall improved wellbeing for those we serve. Many of our patients express to us

that receiving affirming and patient-centered care at our clinic has even led them to feel more empowered and improved their sense of self-worth.

HB22-1267 will provide much-needed training to healthcare providers so that they can better care for our most vulnerable communities. Properly training health care professionals and staff at all levels and across all specialties will also give patients more confidence and trust in their healthcare teams. The bill additionally requires the Department of Regulatory Agencies to encourage provider participation in the training courses, establishing the development of skills related to cultural responsiveness as a priority for all health care professionals. ***Vivent Health strongly encourages you to support HB22-1267 and help ensure that all Coloradans receive care that is affirming, culturally appropriate, and treats them with the dignity they deserve.***