



## MAKE HIV HISTORY

Passing MONA and Ending Stigma

### Missouri Elected Officials, Advocates Discuss Anti-Stigma Agenda for Next Missouri State Legislative Session

*Vivent Health brings together key leaders to address ending stigma*

**ST. LOUIS, MO - October 22, 2020** - Vivent Health recently hosted a virtual discussion with community members, elected officials and thought leaders across Missouri to promote equality for the LGBTQIA community and increase access to quality care to people affected by HIV/AIDS. This timely virtual discussion was part of Vivent Health's "Make HIV History" series, which highlights a range of social issues that impact the lives of people living with and at-risk for HIV/AIDS.

"There are great challenges, beyond the record number of people living with HIV and beyond the number of people who still need access to care, and some of the tremendous ones, sadly, continue to be stigma and discrimination. We've made so much progress in the fight against HIV/AIDS since the early 1980s, but we've made precious little progress in the fight against stigma and discrimination," said Michael Gifford, President and Chief Executive Officer of Vivent Health, who participated in the virtual discussion. "Stigma and discrimination make it harder to access health care and harder to access the prevention and education that people need to live a long and healthy life. Events like this, that allow people to learn about and become advocates for dismantling stigma, discrimination and racism are still very, very important."

An important topic addressed and agreed upon by the panel is the need to pass the Missouri Nondiscrimination Act (MONA), which has been close to adoption several times since its introduction 20 years ago. MONA would add sexual orientation and gender identity to Missouri's Human Rights Act, which currently prohibits discrimination in employment, housing and public accommodations for other protected categories, including race, sex and national origin.

"MONA is something that I believe we can get passed, but it will require leadership in both the House and the Senate in Jefferson City to bring it to a vote," said State Representative Greg Razer, a Democrat who represents District 25 in the Missouri House of Representatives and who is an ardent supporter for MONA. "There's a lot of momentum, and a lot of support for MONA going on behind the scenes; we need to activate the people and the districts where the leadership of the Missouri general assembly live, to put pressure on them to move this and until we do that, we will continue to struggle."

State Representative Mike Stephens, a Republican member of the Missouri House of Representatives and an ardent supporter for MONA in previous sessions, also spoke as a panelist during the virtual discussion. "This lack of protection is standing in the way of economic opportunity. The vulnerability is there, and people are aware of it," said Rep. Stephens. "Industry leaders are going to have to step forward in a major, bold, unequivocal way to clearly demonstrate that not passing MONA is an obstacle to economic development that limits the talent they require to advance their companies and to grow."

“Stigma... I know it all too well, I live it 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Stigma is the last hurdle to the finish line for equality. We must work together to overcome the stigma and finally pass MONA,” said Christa Lou Cunningham, President of Pride St. Louis and the first trans person to hold an executive position for Pride, who made a special appearance during the virtual discussion. “MONA impacts all of us. We know we can do great things together, and as a community and along with our allies, we can come together and finally get MONA passed.”

A second relevant topic that was discussed was how stigma is one of the biggest barriers to ending HIV as an epidemic and advancing equality to members of the LGBTQIA community. Stigma includes the internal and external biases that come with labeling people as part of a group that is believed to be socially unacceptable. “The impact inequality has had on the LGBTQIA community is astounding. LGBTQIA people across the country face persuasive discrimination and stigma, which severely impacts their health, well-being and ability to live and work a normal life,” said Michael Sam, NCAA All-American football player, first openly gay NFL player and active public speaker who made a special appearance during the virtual discussion. “By sharing a little about my own experiences, and sending this message of support, I can help in a small way to continue the important mission of advancing rights, protections and equality for all LGBTQIA people.”

Stephen Eisele, executive director at PROMO - Missouri’s LGBTQ advocacy nonprofit - also spoke as a panelist on this virtual discussion. “We have to have open and honest conversations to eliminate the number of barriers, like stigma, that LGBTQIA folks face. Being able to meet people where they are and understanding that events like this one where we are engaging with folks and sharing information and providing resources is critically important,” said Eisele. “We need to think about how we can continue to move these conversations online during COVID-19 and continue connecting with people where they are to make sure they have the resources they need to make informed decisions.”

Ongina, an American drag performer who came out as HIV positive on the first season of RuPaul's Drag Race, also made a special appearance during the virtual “Make HIV History” discussion and shared how stigma impacted her coming out. “I came out as being HIV positive on national television in 2009 and at the time I hadn’t even told my parents about my status being HIV positive, so there was a lot of fear that it wasn’t going to be received well and that people would look at me like another statistic,” said Ongina. “I can really fully live my life free and I can help with the stigma that is associated with the virus because I am an example of somebody who is living their life to the fullest even though I am HIV positive. And that is really the message that I want to convey.”

Vivent Health’s “Make HIV History” series encourages community members to raise their voices and support people living impacted by HIV to ensure that access to quality health care and prevention is available to everyone who needs it. View a recorded version of “Make HIV History: Passing MONA and Ending Stigma” [here](#) and stay tuned for future HIV virtual events [here](#).

## VIVENT HEALTH

Vivent Health is a nationally recognized leader in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Vivent Health is best known for its high-quality HIV patient outcomes and operates the only HIV Medical Home in America recognized by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. The HIV Medical Home model of care offers integrated health and social services including medical, dental, mental health and pharmacies, along with case management and social support provided by a team of professionals dedicated to patient care. Vivent Health is also a leading

provider of innovative and aggressive prevention services that help at-risk individuals remain HIV negative. Vivent Health operates in 15 locations in Colorado, Missouri, Texas and Wisconsin, and serves tens of thousands of people at-risk for HIV, and more than 8,000 people living with HIV annually. To learn more about Vivent Health go to [www.viventhealth.org](http://www.viventhealth.org).

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