The Florida Consortium for HIV/AIDS Research at The AIDS Institute

In 2009, Florida led the nation in the number and rate of new HIV diagnoses.\(^1\) A statewide HIV research consortium has been created to apply novel strategies to the investigation and control of HIV, with an overarching interest in attracting new funding to Florida for HIV research. This is a best practice that is unique in the nation, but could be adopted by other states.

The Florida Consortium for HIV/AIDS Research (FCHAR) is the scientific arm of The AIDS Institute, a nonprofit organization founded in Florida in 1985, with a focus on policy, research, advocacy and education. FCHAR currently comprises 116 members who account for more than 400 recent and ongoing HIV-related studies. The researchers represent 7 universities, the Florida Department of Health and 11 other research entities across the state, including those from the private sector.

Conceived in 2010, and first convened in February 2011, FCHAR conducted its second annual summit in Orlando on January 9, 2012. Sixty prominent researchers from around the state gathered to advance a collaborative HIV/AIDS research agenda. Eighteen experts participated in didactic presentations and audience-interactive panels covering ethics, institutional review boards (IRBs) and 3 types of HIV/AIDS studies: clinical trials, epidemiologic/behavioral investigations and basic science research.

FCHAR functions as a coordinating body that facilitates communication, policy development and establishment of best practices among cooperating member organizations. It serves as a vital conduit of information on how best to partner on research studies. The expectation is that inter-organizational collaboration, rather than self-interest, will help attract greater HIV/AIDS research resources to the state and avoid duplication.

Specific aims of FCHAR include leveraging these collaborations into the development of highly effective prevention interventions, new diagnostics and novel antiretrovirals and immunotherapies. Ultimate goals include the translation of cutting-edge research into the discovery of therapeutic and preventive vaccines, as well as a cure.

During the past year, an FCHAR Executive Advisory Committee and 4 working subcommittees have been lowering barriers to research collaboration, both natural (e.g., geography) and manmade (e.g., multiple IRBs and legal counsels). A current, specific initiative that emerged from the committee meetings and the second annual FCHAR summit is to streamline the IRB process, while preserving essential local and ethical perspectives. Also, several innovative, multi-organizational study protocols are currently in development. FCHAR has compiled a statewide HIV/AIDS Research Inventory, which is evolving into a more comprehensive, Web-based database to facilitate and expedite recruitment of participants into research studies. A recent member survey on hard-to-reach populations (e.g., MSM who do not identify as gay or bisexual) and hard-to-obtain biological specimens (e.g., those from acutely infected individuals)

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has identified a number of common challenges and unique solutions for sharing among the organizations.

In addition to these member-focused initiatives, FCHAR has developed a patient-focused brochure to inform prospective study participants about the nature, benefits and risks of clinical trials. An educational program about how to interpret basic epidemiologic data has been developed for widespread, Web-based publication to benefit laypersons, including health professionals and the media, as well as vulnerable populations and study participants. Another Web-based program is being developed to provide information to those in care on the interpretation of complicated lab reports.

In today’s economic environment, it makes sense for the Florida HIV research community to work together toward common goals, and to share data and resources. FCHAR has the momentum and talent to lay a solid research foundation for the achievement of ambitious goals like reducing HIV incidence, morbidity and mortality. The Consortium is a model for consideration by other states that wish to be on the cutting edge of HIV research, and to contribute to the body of knowledge about HIV/AIDS prevention, care and treatment.

Prepared by:

Spencer Lieb, MPH
HIV/AIDS Research Coordinator
Florida Consortium for HIV/AIDS Research/The AIDS Institute