Good afternoon. My name is Emily McCloskey, Public Policy Associate at The AIDS Institute. We are very pleased the Committee on Preventive Services for Women has taken on the task of researching additional preventive services for women to be covered by private insurers. Today, we would like to discuss HIV among women in the United States, the importance of HIV testing for women, and the need to include routine HIV testing as a covered preventative service for women.

As was mentioned by several speakers at your first meeting, HIV has had an increasing impact on women in the United States and women are being infected at alarming rates. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), women make up about a quarter of all new HIV infections in the United States. There are over 278,000 women living with HIV in the United States and about 94,000 women in the US have died since the beginning of the epidemic. Women of color are disproportionately impacted. The HIV incidence rate for black women was nearly 15 times as high as that of white women and the incidence rate for Hispanic/Latina women is nearly four times as high as that of white women. Women make up two thirds of new infections from heterosexual contact and over one third of new infections from intravenous drug use.

Current HIV testing is often based on a risk assessment, which includes women who are pregnant. Under the Affordable Care Act, since risk based HIV testing has received a Grade A from the US Preventive Services Task Force, this type of HIV testing should be covered by private insurance plans. However, basing a decision to have a HIV test based on perceived level of risk is inadequate and misses many people who are HIV positive, including many women.
Risk assessments focus on known and disclosed behavior that would potentially put someone at risk. It does not account for behaviors that are not revealed to health care providers or not known because of a partner’s risk behaviors. The United States Preventative Services Task Force found that testing based on risk misses up to a quarter of HIV-positive patients because they did not report any risk behaviors. This leads to high rates of undiagnosed infection.

The CDC estimates that in the United States there are over 1.1 million people living with HIV, but approximately 21% of them are undiagnosed and therefore, unaware of their HIV status. There are many health risks that come with a late term diagnosis and those who are undiagnosed advance to AIDS in much shorter time spans than those who are diagnosed early in their HIV infection. People who are undiagnosed and not seeking treatment also pose a greater risk of transmitting HIV to others.

The CDC has estimated that of all of the people who are undiagnosed in the United States, 47,200 to 59,200 are women. The women who are undiagnosed have often had previous interactions with the health care system, but have not been offered a test, because of their perceived low risk factors. According to a study in South Carolina, 73.4% of all patients who were newly diagnosed with HIV had visited a health care facility one or more times prior to testing HIV positive.

For these reasons, the CDC recommends routine voluntary opt out testing for everyone from ages 13-64 in health care settings. Routinely offered HIV testing would reduce the number of undiagnosed women and ensure that all women are tested for HIV regardless of their perceived risk. This will lead to better health outcomes for women who are infected with HIV. Earlier diagnoses will lead to longer life expectancies, earlier medical treatment, and a lessened risk of transmission to others, which would slow the HIV epidemic. Routine HIV testing is also cost effective. The cost of treatment for someone who has been diagnosed at an early stage is less than half of the costs for a patient diagnosed at a later stage.

The AIDS Institute believes the CDC recommendations for routine HIV testing should be included as a standard of care for all women. To help ensure that women are offered HIV tests, it is important that the tests are properly reimbursed by insurance companies. Therefore, we highly recommend that routine HIV testing be included as part of the mandatory preventative services package for women. Thank you.

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