



## CAISO: Sex and Gender Justice

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### CAISO Demands that the Ministry of Health Stop Withholding Critical Medication for HIV Prevention

On World AIDS Day 2022, **CAISO: Sex and Gender Justice** reiterates our demand for the Ministry of Health to make HIV Prevention Medication (PrEP) free and accessible to the public. Since 2017, CAISO (along with several civil society organisations) has urged the Ministry to make PrEP available without any restrictions to persons in all key populations.

PrEP (short for pre-exposure prophylaxis) is a HIV medication that when used consistently, reduces the risk of HIV infection during sex by over 90%. The WHO recommends daily use of PrEP for both men and women at substantial risk of acquiring HIV. The other type of HIV prevention medication is PEP (post-exposure prophylaxis), which is prescribed in emergency situations for people after possible exposure to HIV. Both are necessary medications in the fight to end HIV.

Currently, access to PrEP is regulated and controlled by the Ministry of Health through the Medical Research Foundation. This means that life-saving medication is unavailable to already vulnerable communities most in need of it.

In June 2016, Trinidad and Tobago signed onto the UN High-Level Meeting Political Declaration to eliminate the spread of HIV by 2030. However, Minister of Health, Terrance Deyalsingh, has refused to make PrEP easily available because of his belief that it will encourage people “to engage in some sort of behaviour that would cause you to be at a higher risk of getting HIV and you want to take a drug to prevent yourself from getting HIV” (*Newsday*, December 15, 2019).

CAISO Director Angelique V. Nixon argues that this is exactly why we need PrEP: “The Ministry of Health should be supporting rather than punishing people for what is framed as ‘risky behaviour’. The Minister should instead be making sure HIV prevention is readily available and accessible to everyone, especially those populations considered ‘most at risk’. We challenge the Ministry and Minister to do their jobs and protect the public rather than shame people or put key populations at greater risk.”

Last month (November), at the Ministry of Health’s National HIV/AIDS Symposium “*The First 95 - Partnering to Close the Gap*”, Minister Deyalsingh affirmed that the country needs a



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“serious public health intervention to manage the disease and the burden on the population” and indicated the Ministry’s intention to facilitate a societal response.

It is vital that the societal response includes the initiation of a PrEP programme. We do not have to reinvent the wheel as Barbados, Guyana and Jamaica have already implemented successful programmes. Therefore, templates for the solutions we need are already here in the region. Moreover, there are regional and international guidelines for implementation and documented best practices supported by the Pan Caribbean Partnership Against HIV/AIDS (PANCAP), Pan American Health Organisation, and the World Health Organisation.

We must equalize access to HIV prevention medication for all people living in Trinidad and Tobago who can benefit from the drug. If we are to achieve the goals outlined by the WHO’s Global Health Sector Strategy on HIV of no more than 200,000 new infections by 2030, then prevention is a habit that we must encourage and cultivate. We call on the Ministry of Health to be serious about achieving HIV elimination by 2030 through an HIV response plan that includes PrEP – making it accessible.

It is estimated that 11,000 people are living with HIV in Trinidad and Tobago. The LGBTQI+ community (and key populations in particular - namely trans people, gay men, and sex workers) are over-tested but under-supported by the state and other public health stakeholders when it comes to HIV. Clients of **CAISO’s Wholeness and Justice Programme** receive much needed psychosocial support to deal with the internalised stigma and external discrimination they experience as a result of misinformation in the public sector about HIV.

According to Wholeness and Justice Community Caseworker, Rae Alibey, who offers support for clients in navigating social services, “LGBTQI+ people and people involved in sex work are made more vulnerable and experience discrimination in the public health system. This makes access and adherence to HIV treatment very challenging for marginalised communities. It is cheaper and more effective to fund and support HIV prevention than to manage treatment and related psychosocial care. We must do better as a country and work with advances in medicine and public health to improve health outcomes and save lives.”

Sex workers are vulnerable to contracting HIV, due to the nature of their jobs and the criminalisation of sex work. This is another vulnerable group left in the cold by Minister Deyalsingh’s refusal to make PrEP freely accessible.

For World AIDS Day 2022, CAISO is also launching a Toolkit for the LGBTQI+ community that focuses on HIV treatment, care, and mental health. Spearheaded by CAISO volunteer Dominique Absalom and Project and Community Outreach Associate Johannah-Rae Reyes, the resource is influenced by our service provision through the Wholeness and Justice Programme and engagement with community members over the past two years. The Toolkit also offers safer sex practices and practical strategies for LGBTQI+ people living with HIV.



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The overall aim is to help LGBTQI+ communities and those who serve them, combat misconceptions and find resources on psychosocial HIV care.

*CAISO Sex and Gender Justice is a feminist organisation that seeks to mobilise a forward-thinking, visionary, and human rights approach to wholeness, justice, and inclusion for Trinidad and Tobago's LGBTQI+ communities, through developing analysis, alliances, and advocacy. CAISO runs a programme called Wholeness & Justice that expands access by LGBTQI+ people in Trinidad and Tobago to wholeness, justice, and health and human services. The programme responds to violations by delivering clinically competent, trauma-informed interventions that enable healing and resilience.*

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