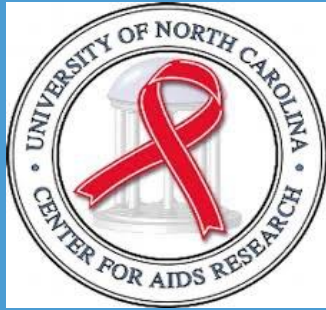


# Advancing Together: New Leadership, Groundbreaking Research, and Community Voices



April 2026

## WHAT'S NEW

DZAMA EDUCATION PROGRAM

WHAT MAKES HIV SILENTLY INFECT CELLS?

THE POWER OF COMMUNITY

ELLA/HER CAMPAIGN

UPCOMING EVENTS, CONFERENCES, & AWARENESS DAYS

## The Dzama Community Education Development Program, Sponsored by UNC Project-Malawi

*By Irving Hoffman, Director of International Operations for the IGHID International Director, UNC Project-Malawi*

Dzama is a rural subsistence farming community located in Lilongwe District Malawi where UNC Project-Malawi has most of its academic activities. The Dzama Education Development Program was founded in 2004 with the



*Students from Dzama Pre-School*

primary objective of supporting orphans who had lost their parents to HIV/AIDS. The program operated as a pre-school orphanage serving 36 children. Since that time the program has made significant strides in addressing the critical needs of the community in the areas of childhood education, nutrition and infrastructure with the help from the Malawi Ministry of Education (MOE) who took over the cost and management of the Dzama primary school in 2014.

Thanks to generous funding from donors, especially from UNC faculty and alumni and the CFAR community, the program has built 14 classrooms for both the primary school and the pre-school in addition to a water well, toilet facilities and teacher housing.



*Literary class for young mothers in Dzama*

Currently, the pre-school (age 2-5) has 500 students and 4 UNC-supported teachers. The primary school has 2,000 students, and 39 Malawi (MOE) supported teachers. Each school day UNC provides all 2,500

children with a hot protein and fat enriched porridge breakfast, and 500 pre-school students each receive 1 hard-boiled egg at lunchtime to aid in preventing growth stunting.

Because of new initiatives to improve the quality of the education in the pre-school and to continue an adult literacy and empowerment class in Dzama, there are plans to build a new pre-school and adult education campus in Dzama.

Donations are welcome through the [UNC Health Foundation](#), the [Dzama Malawi Fund](#).



*Students from Dzama Primary School*



## Stealth mode: What makes HIV silently infect cells?

*By Rachel Burdorf, PhD candidate - Joseph Lab*

When someone has HIV, before they get treatment, the HIV virus constantly infects new immune cells and kills them, which damages the immune system over time. Starting treatment prevents HIV from infecting any new cells, but already-infected cells can survive. This happens because HIV can silently infect cells, establishing a foothold and then pausing. Until the HIV reactivates, the body can't detect it inside the cell. Silently infected cells can survive for decades during treatment, and they prevent HIV from being cured.

In my lab, we study those surviving silently infected cells, which are referred to as the “reservoir.” We are most curious about when the reservoir cells were infected - how many years before the person started treatment? Previously, we found that for most people, reservoir cells were usually infected right before they started treatment. This was surprising, and in our current work we wanted to understand that better.

When we sequence an HIV virus, we take its unique fingerprints. For each person in our cohort, we “fingerprinted” viruses from every year before they started treatment, and we also fingerprinted the viruses from reservoir cells surviving during treatment. Then we matched the fingerprints from the reservoir cells to the fingerprints from before treatment. This let us estimate how many years before treatment each reservoir cell was infected.

For this study, we used samples from participants in the MWCCS (MACS/WIHS Combined Cohort Study), a long-running national cohort – with a site here at UNC – that has followed people with and without HIV for nearly 40 years. Because the study has worked with the same people over those years, collecting samples from them every year, we were able to get samples from those people from before and after they started treatment. This was critical for our fingerprinting strategy.

In this cohort, we found that most reservoir cells were infected right before treatment. Having a larger proportion of reservoir cells infected close to treatment was strongly linked to worse immune system function before treatment and worse immune recovery during treatment. Surprisingly, factors like age, sex, and delay in starting treatment were not associated with when reservoir cells were infected. Our goal is to get a better understanding of what factors cause reservoir formation so that we can design treatments to either reactivate the silent HIV and clear out the reservoir or block most of the reservoir from forming at all, to improve long term health outcomes for people living with HIV.

# The Power of Community

By Cesar V. Felipe, Triad Health Project

This year, my visit to Capitol Hill in Washington DC included some tornado warnings, celebrities, and the reminder of the power of community in difficult times. Personally, for this being my second year visiting the offices of the legislators at Congress, I felt more confident in comparison with my first time in 2025. The difference is clear: this time, when I was meeting with the legislative aides, I was able to bring the voices of clients and the community I'm working with now as the Community Wellness Liaison in Triad Health Project.



Since I started my work as an advocate with the Gay Men of Color Fellowship in 2024, I learned about the importance of these opportunities to push change and keep supporting the underserved populations. A year ago, when I was looking for a job, I visited the Capitol to alert legislators about the changes in public policy affecting programs focused on prevention and treatment of HIV. Now, for my visit in 2026, I arrived in DC with the motivation of defending the tools that allow us to offer care and support to People Living With HIV.

With the support of NMAC and AIDS United, I attended AIDS Watch 2026 with other advocates and activists living with HIV for Capitol Hill Day. Although Adriana Galdo Adams, CEO and Strategist from Triad Health Project, and other elements from the North Carolina delegation were expecting to come, some tornado warnings and flight delays made the trip more difficult, and some made the decision to stay at home. The weather wasn't the only factor out of place for Capitol Hill Day, we also found delays getting access to the buildings of Congress, and this was the way some of us ended up stocking up on the lines to pass the security check and enter. However, some others finally made it and started with meetings on time, bringing conversations about funding cuts, flat funding not being enough and support to Medicaid, besides other import requests.

During the visit at the Capitol, the spotlight was captured suddenly for some of The Real Housewives, TV personalities and very popular icons in the United States pop culture. As an immigrant who is not very familiar with the show, I was happy some of the attendants to Capitol Hill Day who are fans were able to meet some of their idols talking about HIV awareness and PrEP too. The visit also included an awkward moment when we tried to drop off some information at the office of the representative Virginia Foxx, where we sadly found the doors closed, the mailbox with tape and some signs asking not to leave anything and not to take pictures.

After the journey to DC this year, that is the only image that is stuck in my mind from the visit: finding a door closed when symbolically it should be open to receive the people and listen to them. And with that image in mind, I came back to North Carolina to keep working to bring changes like opening those doors with the power of community and for the community.

**HIV/AIDS 5K**  
5K • Run & Walk

Run For Hope -  
Run For Awareness

Every step supports those living with HIV/AIDS.  
Together, we move toward a future free from stigma.

- Starting Location: UC Central Plaza
- Free red ribbon and T-shirt at check-in
- \$25 sign-up fee to run/walk: link in caption
- More info on the next slide ---->

**25 April 2026**  
Check-in at 8:00 AM,  
Race starts at 8:30 AM

**Register Now!**  
Link in bio

## Ella/Her Campaign

By Judith Montenegro, Latinos in the South and Latino Commission on AIDS

Latinos in the South has partnered with Lambda Pi Chi, a Latina sorority with seven undergraduate chapters in North Carolina to lend space to important conversations about HIV awareness, prevention, and advocacy for Black and Latina women through our Ella/Her Campaign. We aim to inspire and empower more Black and Latina women to take control of their health and be empowered to make informed decisions for themselves and their sexual experiences. We invite you to join us at

Western Carolina University for an HIV/AIDS 5k Run & Walk on April 25 at 8AM. To register, please use this link: [forms.gle/vP2sF9Kmv1dqJLM56](https://forms.gle/vP2sF9Kmv1dqJLM56)

Ella/Her is a collaborative campaign between the Latino Commission on AIDS, Southern AIDS Coalition, and the NC AIDS Action Network. To learn more about Ella/Her, visit [www.ellaher.org](http://www.ellaher.org)

## Events, Conferences, & Awareness Days

**OUR VOICES  
OUR HEALTH**

Join us for a community gathering to eat, and discuss HIV care, health access and what our communities need right now.

**April 24th**  
4 pm - 6 pm

Register at [bit.ly/wnc-hiv](https://bit.ly/wnc-hiv)

WNCCHS  
257 Biltmore Ave  
Asheville, NC

[Learn more/register here.](#)

**ADVOCACY  
DAY**

Join us Tuesday, April 28, 2026!

NMAC  
Ending the HIV Epidemic

NCAIDS ACTION NETWORK

LATINOS IN SOUTH

AIDSWatch

equality federation

ViiV Healthcare

[Learn more/register here.](#)

WNCAP PRESENTS WITH SUPPORT FROM ViiV HEALTHCARE

**LOUD & CLEAR**

VOICING OUR RIGHTS TO CARE

MARCH 31, 2026 - WINSTON-SALEM

**ADVOCATE HIGHLIGHT**

**ALICIA DIGGS**

PRESENTING:  
Thriving as a Person Living With HIV:  
Steps to Becoming An Advocate,  
Activist, and Leader

**WINSTON-SALEM • ASHEVILLE • COLUMBIA**

The second session of Loud & Clear: Voicing Our Rights to Care is in Asheville on May 5, in collaboration with ViiV Healthcare and WNCAP! [Learn more here.](#)

# Upcoming Conferences

*April 30-May 2: American Conference for the Treatment of HIV in Atlanta, GA*

*June 22-24: Continuum 2026 in San Juan, PR*

*July 24-25: 18<sup>th</sup> International Workshop on Pediatrics & HIV*

*July 26-31: 26<sup>th</sup> International AIDS Conference in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil and virtually*

*September 17-20: United States Conference on HIV/AIDS (USCHA) in Anaheim, CA*

# Awareness Days

*May 18: HIV Vaccine Awareness Day #HVA*

*June 5: HIV Long-Term Survivors Awareness Day #HLTSAD*

*June 27: National HIV Testing Day #HIVTestingDay*

*July 27: Zero HIV Stigma Day #ZeroHIVStigmaDay*

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