

World AIDS Day 2021:

End inequalities. End AIDS

THE EQUAL Opportunity Commission (EOC) joins United Nations (UN) members to commemorate World AIDS Day. Every year, on December 1, the world unites to show support for people living with HIV or AIDS and to remember those who have died from AIDS-related illnesses.

The theme for World AIDS Day 2021 is “End inequalities. End AIDS.” It focuses on our individual responsibility to avoid stigmatisation and discrimination in order to foster an environment where people living with HIV or AIDS feel comfortable to seek treatment and proper care, education and other essential services. This can close the gaps on HIV prevention, testing, treatment and support.

As the leading state advocate on equality and the elimination of discrimination, the EOC has proposed amendments to



the Attorney General to allow, among other things, for HIV and AIDS to be classified as a disability, thereby falling within the remit of the Equal Opportunity Act. This will enable people who have been discriminated against to lodge a complaint at the EOC and get redress.

How can HIV be classified as a disability?

HIV and AIDS affect the im-

mune system and many of the body's organs, including the brain and nervous system. The latter condition is classified as HIV encephalopathy.

This condition can affect a person's motor functions and cognitive abilities, eventually leading to dementia.

Considering that an HIV infection can cause impairment that would substantially limit functions of the body, if not medically treated, a person liv-

ing with an HIV infection can fall within the act's definition for having a disability. Section 3 of the act defines disability as:

- A total or partial loss of a bodily function;
- Total or partial loss of a part of the body;
- Malfunction of a part of the body;
- Including a mental or psychological disease or disorder;
- or
- Malformation or disfigurement of part of the body.

They should be eligible to some form of reasonable accommodation if necessary, notwithstanding that it does not place an undue hardship or financial burden to the employer.

The way Forward

According to the World Health Organization, HIV continues to be a significant global public health issue.

A report by the UNAIDS in 2020 estimated that an average of 10,000 people were living with HIV in Trinidad and Tobago.

So how do we move past this HIV epidemic? Having regard for basic human rights is an excellent place to start.

According to the UN, there is an interconnection between human rights and the spread and impact of HIV on individuals and communities globally.

We can help end HIV stigma and discrimination through words and actions used in our everyday lives and by further providing support for people living with HIV or AIDS to work through internalised stigma.

Remember, HIV and AIDS can affect everyone regardless of their age, sex, orientation or race and every voice and action can contribute to ending this epidemic.