



Changing Laws and Changing Lives

HIV advocate Lashanda Salinas helped reform Tennessee's HIV criminalization laws.

January 19, 2024 By Lashanda Salinas

I'm an advocate living in the state of Tennessee. I have been living with HIV for 25 years. Last year, I wrote an article titled "[My World Stopped When I Was Charged With Criminal Exposure to HIV.](#)" I shared how after ending a six-month relationship, I was charged with criminal exposure. I had met a gentleman on a chat line and told him I was HIV positive before we met. After our mutual breakup, I thought everything was fine until two police officers walked into where I worked and asked to speak with me. They said they had a warrant for my arrest. They told me my ex-boyfriend had filed charges against me stating that I did not tell him that I was HIV positive. At that moment, my world stopped.

I was charged with criminal exposure to HIV and sent to jail. My bond was set at \$100,000. I was in jail for about a week or so when I got the dreaded call that my father had passed away. I knew that people were often allowed out of jail for the funeral of a close relative, so I asked my case manager what I needed to do. The funeral home sent a letter to my public defender. I was granted a furlough and offered another plea. The new plea was three years probation. I really didn't want to take it because I knew I was innocent. But taking the plea meant I could go home and be with my family. So I accepted it. But when I took the plea, I wasn't told that I would have to register as a sex offender for the rest of my life.

I didn't find that out until my probation was transferred to the city where I live now. My probation officer called me at work and told me that I had 24 hours to go and register as a sex offender. My life stopped again at that moment.

Three years ago, I decided that I wanted to speak out about my story of being unjustly criminalized because of my HIV status. Being on probation as a sex offender was depressing. I had to go to sex offender classes that were also attended by child molesters. I am not a child molester. I had to pay \$150 a year to be listed on the registry. I had to take a lie detector test every six months until I was off probation.

While on the sex offender registry, I became a hermit. I would only go to the grocery store, doctor's appointments and church. Whenever I went out, I always looked over my shoulder to make sure I was doing everything right. If I was at the doctor's office or the grocery store and a child came near me, I had to immediately leave or go to the other side of the room.

I decided to use my voice for the people who are afraid to stand up and speak out. I told my case manager at Nashville Cares my story and that I wanted to speak out because I did not want anyone to go through what I had been through. During my advocacy journey, I have met some amazing people, including some who share similar experiences.

My first assignment was the Day on the Hill in Nashville with the Tennessee AIDS Advocacy Network (TANN), which works in tandem with Nashville Cares. I was a nervous wreck because I had to speak to state senators and representatives and tell them my story and let them know how the laws do not match science. I spoke to one senator who did not know that criminal exposure to HIV was against the law. I shared my story and told him how stigmatizing that law is. I started working with more organizations and trying to repeal or amend these laws.

Well, my work paid off, because on May 17, 2023, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee signed a law that removes criminal HIV exposure from the list of offenses that require sex offender registration. (Criminal exposure is still classified as a class C felony, which carries a jail sentence of three to 15 years—the same as vehicular homicide.)

I was informed that I had to write to the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation (TBI) to request to be removed from the sex offender registration. I emailed and sent a certified letter as well. A couple of weeks passed without any response. The law was to go into effect on July 1.

On July 2 or 3, my best friend and fellow advocate was blowing up my phone. She was calling, texting, emailing and reaching out on Facebook. I called her back, and she told me to go online and check the registry. I did and could not find myself listed. I kept refreshing the page because I thought it was a hoax.

I called the agency to see what was going on. When I spoke to someone, she proceeded to tell me that as of July 1, I no longer had to register as a sex offender. I was shocked and wanted proof that this was real, so she sent me a copy of the confirmation email from the TBI. I had been on the sex offender registry for a total of 17 years.

Lashanda Salinas

Do you know how I felt at that moment? The sun began to shine in my direction. There was light at the end of the tunnel I was in. But there is a lot more work to do.

When people started hearing about me getting off the registry, the Lord opened so many doors for me. My fellow advocates decided to have a celebration day for me on November 1. It was a beautiful night, and I was surrounded by love and support from advocates from the Center for HIV Law and Policy, the Elizabeth Taylor AIDS Foundation's HIV Is Not a Crime Council of Justice Leaders, the Sero Project, Positive Women's Network-USA, Nashville Cares and TANN. Without

these organizations, I would not be where I am today.

To anyone afraid to speak up, know that I am your voice. I will put on the armor of God and fight the stigma for you. My motto is: "Changing Laws and Changing Lives."

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