

J A S L  
**DECODED**



**NEWSLETTER**  
**January**  
**March**  
**2021**  
Issue 3, Vol.2

**INSIDE THIS ISSUE:**

**JASL's 30th Anniversary Celebration**

**DweetSafe Campaign**

**JASL's prevention and treatment performance for the third quarter**

**Dear Decoded**

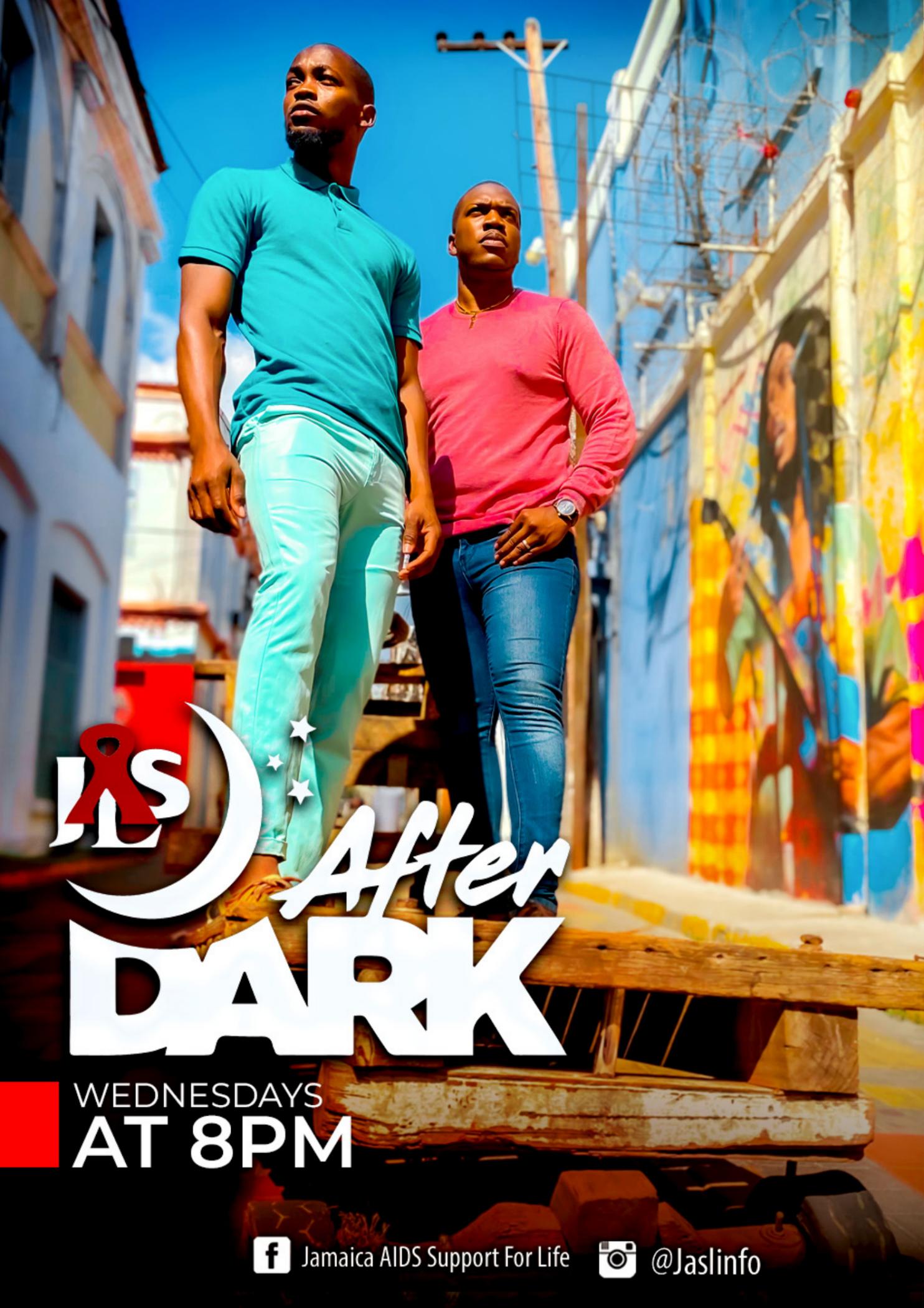
**Fun HIV Quiz**

**Transwoman Returns To Care**

**Unmasking Violence Against Women**



Jamaica AIDS Support For Life is the largest and longest-serving HIV-focused NGO in Jamaica. The contents of the newsletter are the responsibility of JASL and do not necessarily reflect the views of donor agencies supporting the organisation.



**JAS** *After*  
**DARK**

WEDNESDAYS  
AT 8PM

**RESILIENT AT 30!** How JASL went from  
cotching, squatting, homelessness, renting to owning its own property!

**W**hen the HIV & AIDS pandemic emerged in the 1980s, it was called 'Gay-related immune deficiency' or GRID. It quickly became the belief among the masses that gay men were the carriers of the disease. This resulted in a group that was already marginalized being condemned, shunned and discriminated against. This was further exacerbated by the "deadliness" of the disease which further fueled the stigma and discrimination. Similar to what took place with the COVID-19, which first started spreading in Asia, it was only a matter of time before HIV reached Jamaica. When HIV got here in 1982, the country was woefully unprepared to deal with the disease from a clinical standpoint and as a society. A movement dedicated to the response of the HIV pandemic in Jamaica quickly moved from a want to a need!

It was this gap in healthcare and society to adequately deal with the HIV pandemic, that would eventually give birth to Jamaica AIDS Support (JAS). The organization went by the name JAS until 2004, when the name eventually became, Jamaica AIDS Support for Life (JASL). JASL's genesis began in 1991 when a group of friends responded to the needs of one of their peers who had been infected with HIV. Realizing the stigma and discrimination that their friend faced while seeking care in the public health sector, they sprang into action to assist. The group of friends used personal salaries to purchase groceries, pay rent and the medical expense of their critically ill friend. When they could no longer sustain him from their own pockets and cupboards, they hosted a party to raise funds. The very night the party was being hosted, tragedy struck as the friend took his last breath and passed due to AIDS-related complications.

However, what started as assistance to one friend, quickly became a movement that helped hundreds. Dr. Patrica Burke, the doctor who was taking care of their friend told them about several other young men who had become infected with HIV and developed AIDS. Realizing how much of an impact the virus was having on members of the vulnerable community and how many people were in need, they continued with the work. Mr. Ian McKnight, current Board Member and one of the co-founders



Founder & Board Member of JASL. Mr. McKnight is one of the 4 original founders of Jamaica AIDS Support for Life. The 3 others are Howard Daley, Joseph Robinson and Tulip Reid.

of JASL shared with Decoded that:  
*"What struck me was that, here is this guy, my age, dying from AIDS, I knew nothing about AIDS, but I just know I needed to help and I needed to find several others who were also willing to help."*

**JASL KINGSTON**

While the organization has become a household name over the years, this was far from the case when they just started. The first official location of JASL was 11A Osbourne Road, which served as a hospice with 16 beds, meeting space for MSM and other members of the vulnerable community, and an administration office. They quickly outgrew this space, this resulted in the administration office being relocated to 4 Upper Musgrave Road and the hospice to a New Kingston location. This was short lived, the hospice saw its doors shut due to lack of adequate funding. The administration office remained at 4 Upper Musgrave Road for 13 years but had to close after the property on which it operated was sold.

JASL was now homeless, McKnight shared 'no physical space existed, but they hope to keep JASL alive remained in the hearts of all the founders, it proved almost impossible to host meetings because technically we were homeless.' Several efforts were made to rent properties, however, McKnight shared that soon as landlords realise that they would be catering to PLHIV they told them the property was no longer available, "I won't call names, but we contacted quite a few very prominent property owners who shun us,

no amount of pleading changed their minds, they wanted nothing to do with HIV and AIDS.”

In 2013 things started looking up, literally! Under the instrumental leadership of Executive Director, Kandasi Levermore, JASL was able to purchase a building at 3 Hendon Drive through the kind donation from the Ministry of Health. In 2018, the organization received grants from the the government of Japan the USAID, AHF, MAC AIDS to expand. The building which now hosts a clinic and over 15 office spaces is a symbol of hope and resilience.



Kandasi Levermore told Decoded, “it is often those who were once homeless that most appreciate a home. When I look at where we are coming from and how many doors were closed in our face, to now having our own, I am happy.” Mrs. Levermore expressed that while she spearheaded the acquisition it was always a team effort which is always the case at JASL.

## ST ANN

It became clear that the challenge was not just ‘Kingston-centric.’ What started as a movement in the parishes of Kingston and St Andrew, migrated and found roots in the parishes of St. Ann, St Mary, Portland and Montego Bay. In St Ann, the founders spent months seeking out a space to house their meetings, until ‘God literally answered their prayers’. Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Church Hall opened its door and allowed JASL to house meetings and set up an office rent-free. As the organization grew in size, St. Ann office space was rented in Pineapple Place before eventually moving to its current location in St. Ann’s Bay.

## MONTEGO BAY

As HIV continued to spread across Jamaica in the early 2000s, the JASL team worked earnestly to outpace it, trying to provide accurate information

to those who were most affected. To achieve this, meetings and sessions promoting HIV testing and giving basic HIV facts were hosted in Montego Bay. As the demand grew, attempts were made to rent a space in Montego Bay but again landlords in an attempt to distance themselves from all things related to HIV refused rental. Mr. McKnight expressed during the early years in St. James “to continue our work we captured government buildings, we utilized abandon buildings and offices for weeks upon weeks just to ensure we were able to assist those living with and affected by HIV.”

The organization which will officially celebrate its 30th anniversary in November, launched a grand affair at the beginning of 2021 to mark its year-long celebration. The event was well attended by esteemed guests which included JASL’s clients, representatives from civil society, the Ministry of Health and Wellness (MOHW), and international funding agencies such as United Nations and United States Agency International Development (USAID). Mr. Jason Fraser, USAID/Jamaica Country Representative lauded JASL “USAID saw the wisdom in partnering with JASL to meet the needs of Jamaica’s PLHIV community and to help Jamaica address its HIV epidemic. It is a partnership we cherish and hold in high regard, particularly as our direct relationship enables us to invest in JASL’s long-term sustainability and assure its good works continue for the good of Jamaica.”

JASL is the largest and longest-serving HIV-focused, human rights NGO in Jamaica, fighting against the spread of HIV and ensuring the preservation of the rights and dignity of those most vulnerable to the disease. The organization currently operates from three chapters, Kingston, Montego Bay, and St Ann.

Kandasi Walton-Levermore, currently *Executive Director of Jamaica AIDS Support for Life*. Mrs. Levermore played a pivotal role in acquiring JASL’s current building.



# JASL launches #DWEETS SAFE Campaign

In recognition of Safer Sex Week, Jamaica AIDS Support for Life (JASL), hosted a weeklong of activities starting from Monday, February 8 to Saturday, February 13. To raise awareness of the internationally recognized day, JASL did an island wide tour partnering with gyms, pharmacies, hotels, universities and media houses to offer free testing for Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and syphilis. The week was also used to officially launch the organization’s new prevention campaign dubbed “DweetSafe”.

Safer Sex Week (SSW) was first observed in 1994 during the week of Valentine’s Day to encourage sexual partners to practice safer sex in light of the increase in risky sexual behaviour during this time. The message of safer sex seeks to minimize unhealthy sexual habits that may have life-altering repercussions.

In an effort to reduce the risky sexual practices, JASL deployed its team across Jamaica with a very clear-cut message; “dweetsafe and use a condom every time!” In Kingston, JASL partnered with the gym, Alpha’s Iron Den located on Shortwood Road and provided free HIV and Syphilis testing to its members as well as the surrounding environs (the residents of Grants Pen, Mannings Hill Road and Barbican Road).

The team also went to the community of Majestic Garden and did pop up interventions at the Pines Plaza in Portmore, Fairview in Spanish Town, May Pen Square in Clarendon and ended the week at Sovereign on the Boulevard in Kingston.

## Safer Sex Olympics

The highlight of the week took place in Ocho Rios Square where JASL hosted its first Safer Sex Olympics. The activity involved two teams competing in a series of fitness drills while decked out in condom outfits. The fitness challenges included push-ups, flipping tyres, jumping jocks and deadlifts. The event was geared towards showing that ‘hard work can be done in a condom.’ The team partnered with radio station IRIE FM for a live outside broadcast. The St. Ann team also went to Mandeville and Portland issuing information, education and communication (IEC) materials along with thousands of condoms and lubricants.

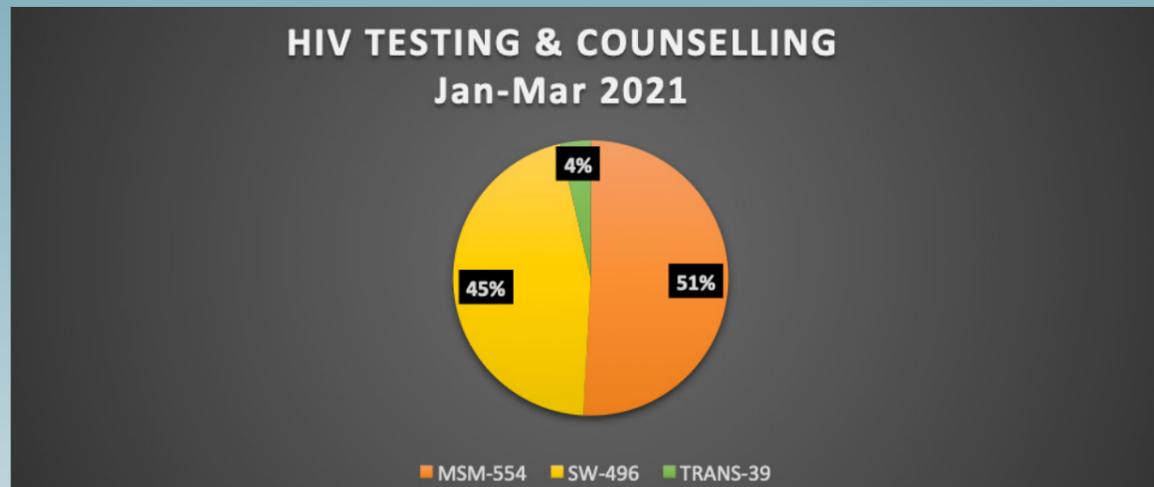
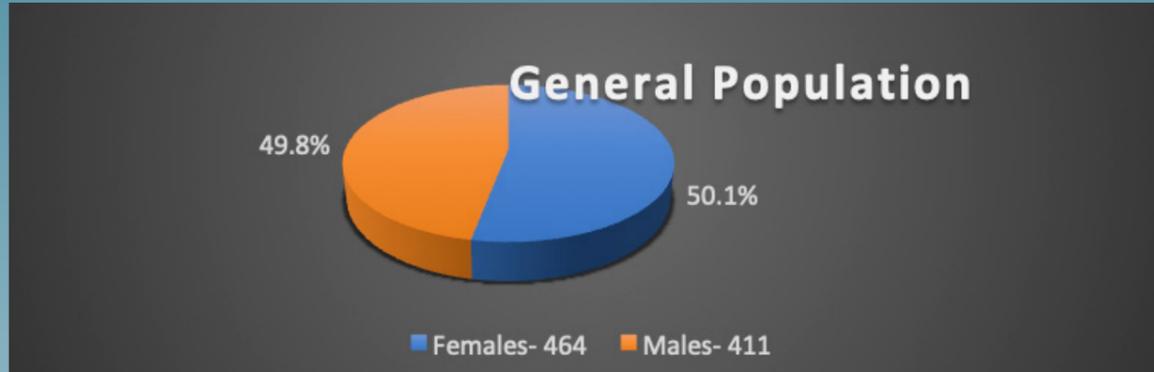
Tisha Keane, Regional Programmes Manager for Montego Bay shared “ Despite COVID-19, we still wanted to observe Safer Sex Week, the team did our utmost best to observe the COVID-19 protocols. However, it was important that we found a way to still provide testing opportunities and safer sex commodities to the general public.” The Montego Bay Chapter took over the western region visiting Junction Square in St. Elizabeth, Negril Square and Savana La Mar Market and the newly opened hotel Ocean Spring Coral. The team also used the opportunity to partner with Ruseas High School and Frome Technical High and conducted interactive sessions around basic HIV transmission and treatment. The DweetSafe is the patois version of ‘Do It Safe’ suggesting that individuals should have safe sex.

The campaign will seek to utilise community engagements, social media activations and mass media to promote condom usage and HIV testing.



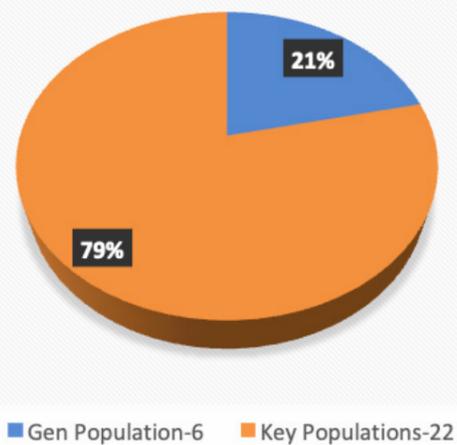
# THE NUMBERS

JASL's Prevention & Treatment Performance for the first quarter of 2021 (January-March)



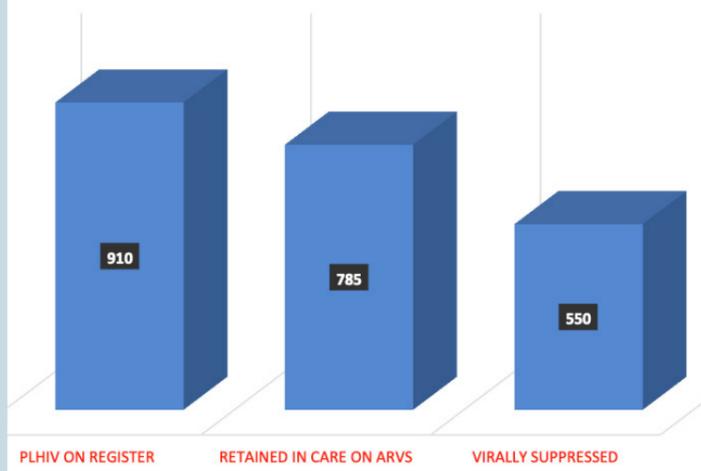
During the first quarter we were able to test **1,964** people across the general and key populations. This is disaggregated as **875** for the general population and **1,089** for the key populations.

## HIV REACTIVE STATISTICS



From those tested, **28** were found reactive to HIV. This is disaggregated as **22** from the key populations and **6** from the general population.

## JASL TREATMENT CASCADE MARCH 2021



# DEAR DECODED

I am writing this with tears in my eyes sitting by the beach alone. Couple days ago, I found out that I was pregnant, then I went to the doctor where he confirmed my pregnancy and took blood and urine samples because I was feeling sick otherwise. I went to get an ultrasound and didn't tell my husband because I was excited when I found out that we were having twins and I wanted to surprise him.

I went back to my doctor and he stated that I have herpes, chlamydia and HIV. I asked my doctor to look at the name correctly, he checked again and told me that the results were in fact true. I left his office driving and crying, I am feeling heartbroken and upset that my husband did this to me. I am just 22 years old and have been married for 4 years. I feel like walking into the ocean and have the waves take me away. I called my mom to tell her about it, and all she had to say was that "HIV never killed nobody so I must stay in my marriage." What should I do?

Yours Truly,  
Petal.

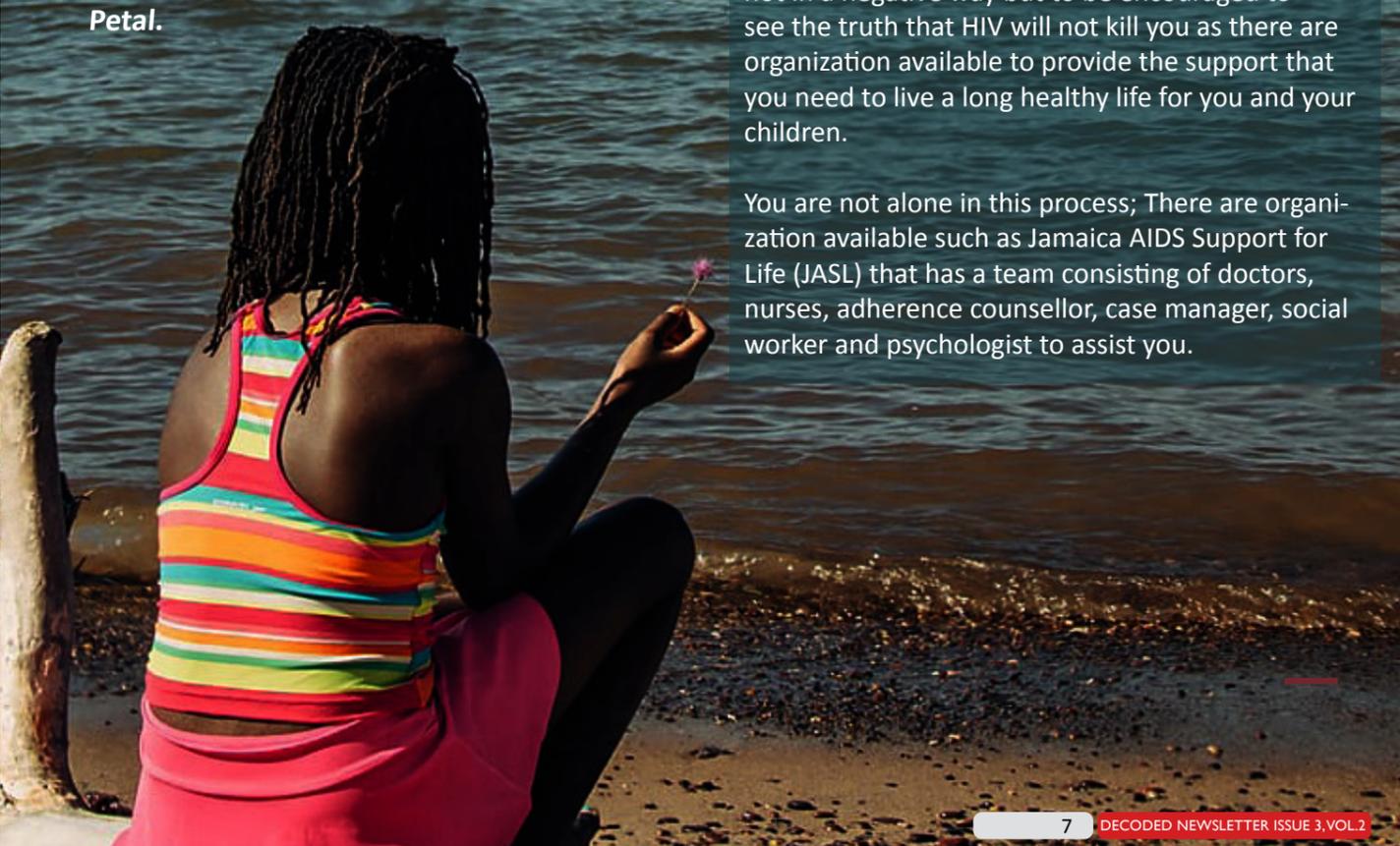
**Dear Petal,**

I applaud you for being courageous in talking about your experience and seeking advice regarding how best to move forward. I would like to use this opportunity to congratulate you on your pregnancy and to assure you that despite your current situation, you will deliver normal healthy children with the advice and continued support from your health care providers over the course of your pregnancy.

The first thing I suggest is to explore psychological services and support that are available for persons newly diagnosed with HIV. Connecting with a professional will help you to explore your feelings related to the diagnosis and what this will mean for your life moving forward. Petal, you will require time to process the information that you recently learnt regarding your HIV status and other STI'S. The psychologist will work with you through the stages of adjustment to this news which is definitely feel like a "roller coaster ride" of emotions now. The goal of the counselling session are to help you towards a place of accepting your diagnosis and to make the healthiest decisions for you and your family. Recognizing how you feel and being open and honest with yourself is definitely a first step in the process and having disclosed to your mother is an indication of your inner honesty.

I encourage you to receive your mother's response not in a negative way but to be encouraged to see the truth that HIV will not kill you as there are organization available to provide the support that you need to live a long healthy life for you and your children.

You are not alone in this process; There are organization available such as Jamaica AIDS Support for Life (JASL) that has a team consisting of doctors, nurses, adherence counsellor, case manager, social worker and psychologist to assist you.



# JASL QUIZ!

1. Where was the first JASL office located?
2. In what year did JASL open its office at 3 Hendon Drive?
3. How many other chapters did JASL have over its full life?
4. Who is the immediate past Executive Director of the Jamaica AIDS Support for Life?
5. What is the name of the Radio and Television series hosted by JASL in the late 1990?
6. In what major town was the Portland chapter of JASL Located?
7. What is the last known community in which the JASL Hospice operated?
8. In what year did the JASL St. Ann Chapter relocate to St. Ann Bay?
9. What was the significant Contribution made to JASL by Pan Caribbean Financial services in 2007?
10. What parish did the 'beach boy intervention' originate from?

While JASL was located at Upper Musgrave Road, the team consisted of three nurses that were inseparable.

## CAN YOU NAME THESE NURSES?



**NURSE 1**



**NURSE 2**



**NURSE 3**

# TRANS WOMAN RETURNS TO CARE

I am a transgender woman.  
I am HIV Positive.  
I am on treatment.

Imagine living a life where you are abused by your partner, have no fixed address, HIV positive, obese, hypertensive, and having to do transactional sex to earn an income. This is no imagination for Karla, this is her true-life story. Karla who is a forty-year-old transgender woman from Kingston was diagnosed with HIV in 2015. The news she describes 'came at a hard time, because I was not living anywhere mi cudda call home. I just stayed with any friends who would allow mi fi stay for a few weeks or suh.'

After being diagnosed, the team at JASL met with Karla and created a programme for her to start on antiretroviral therapy (ART). Karla states 'when I found out, mi just did wah do anything to get better, but things never guh according to plan.' Karla in 2015, was in an abusive relationship where she was often physically assaulted and verbally abused by her boyfriend. This was compounded by the fact that she faced other medical complications including being obese, hepatitis B positive, hypertensive, and genital warts. This led to her becoming depressed, which caused other serious issues including not being adherent. Karla stated that her life felt like a 'never-ending grocery list of bad things.'

Ms. Christina Gordon, Case Manager at JASL mentioned that several efforts were made to assist Karla with adherence. Ms. Gordon explains, 'we felt like we were running out of options, we tried nutritional support and counselling but that still was not working.' As the years progressed, Karla's adherence worsened, she would go months upon months without taking medications. During 2017 and 2018, the team made several attempts at calling and visiting all known home addresses without any success.

In 2019, Karla visited the clinic to access treatment. To assess her medical condition the team did several tests, including that of her viral load. Christina stated "what we found was alarming, Karla's CD4 count was 68. A healthy CD4 ranges from 410 to 1500, she was way below that. Also, there are 3 lines of HIV medications, Karla had to be moved from line 1 to line 2"

The JASL team ramped up its effort to find a solution that could give Karla a second chance at life. Her case was brought to a case conference for a group of experts to design a more intensive programme. Among the recommendations was to have her be a part of an empowerment workshop with other persons who are living with HIV and having issues reaching viral suppression. Instead of focusing on HIV, the workshop was geared at finding other means to empower the clients which included identifying their purpose in life and not see themselves as victims.

By the end of 2020, a drastic change took place, Karla became more accessible. At the start of 2021, Karla has officially returned to treatment and is now enjoying the suite of JASL services which includes nutritional support monthly, support groups, adherence counselling and anal care. Karla has also started Hormones Therapy which is a serviced offered at JASL to members of the transgender community.

Since January 2021, a total of 16 persons living with HIV has returned to care at JASL. The St Ann's Bay clinic has seen 10 persons returning, Montego Bay 6 and Kingston 4. Persons living with HIV who are not on treatment are being encouraged to contact JASL today. Now is the time...



In recognition of International Women's Day, Jamaica AIDS Support for Life (JASL) hosted a virtual symposium under the theme 'Unmasking Violence Against Women in the context of HIV and AIDS' on Monday, March 8. The symposium featured several keynote speakers and two-panel discussions aimed at exploring issues of sexual and gender-based violence and its intersectionality with HIV. It was used to make an urgent call on the government to strengthen legislation to offer greater protection to women.

The symposium allowed for four women who experienced intimate partner violence at the hands of their male partners to share their stories to encourage other women to 'get out' of abusive relationships. Their stories highlighted how often women are further victimised by police when seeking redress.

when they want to use condoms to protect themselves, will not say this to their male partner fearing that they may be beaten and accused of being unfaithful." The report retrospectively reviewed legal cases among 52 of JASL's female clients and found that 39 or 75% experienced physical violence from their partner and 21 or 40% were sexually assaulted or raped by current/previous partner, as well as family members. Nineteen of the 52 women were sexually assaulted or raped at least once before, it happened as early as 13 years old for one woman.

The key speaker at the symposium, Minister Alando Terrelonge, explained that a lot of this violence against our women is rooted in 'toxic masculinity' and it has contributed to Jamaica raising a society of 'broken men.' He shared "toxic masculinity has somehow permeated our culture, a great portion of society believes that to truly be a man, you must be rough and course and box dung yuh woman because a fi yuh property, and yuh can kick har dung and style her as dutti gyal and wukklis gyal." The Minister called on men to play a greater role in protecting women and young girls.

In her address at the forum, Kandasi Levermore, Executive Director at JASL called on the government to work expeditiously in enacting Anti-Discrimination legislation to deal with the stigma and discrimination faced by those living with HIV/AIDS. Levermore also noted that the Domestic Violence Act is woefully inadequate in protecting women, she shares "the Domestic Violence Act in its current form is more bark than bite, it fails to define what domestic violence is, the maximum penalty under the Act for a man violating a protection order is a mere Ten Thousand Jamaican Dollars. If we say we are serious about protecting women, we need laws that reflect this."

As a service provider, JASL has a vested interest in matters related to violence against women considering that a significant portion of their female clients experience abuse. Studies continue to show that women who are abused are at greater risk of contracting HIV and the adherence to treatment regimens are negatively affected for those who are already living with HIV

The virtual symposium was held in partnership with the European Union. JASL encourages women who are being abused to call the police or the crisis hotline at: (876) 929-9038.

# UNMASKING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

While presenting on a technical report titled 'Accessing Justice Through Health', Jade Williams, Legal Support Officer at JASL revealed that "there is a causal link between violence against women and HIV, often women who are raped are at risk of contracting HIV. Women in abusive relationships, even

# JASL QUIZ!

## Answers

- 1. 11A Osbourne Road** - This was the location of JASL's first office which was served as a hospice with 16 beds and a meeting space.
- 2. 2013** - JASL purchased a property in 2013 at 3 Hendon Drive Kingston. This is the current address for the organization's Head Office and Kingston Chapter.
- 3. Five (5)** - We all are familiar with the 3 chapters that currently exist, which are Kingston, St Ann and St James. However, we also had a Portland and St Mary chapter.
- 4. Aston Cooke**
- 5. Life Voices** - The radio and television programme was geared towards raising awareness around HIV and AIDS. The programme also served to help reduce stigma and discrimination often faced by people living with and affected by HIV.
- 6. Port Antonio**
- 7. Trafalgar Park**
- 8. 2017**
- 9. 2007 Toyota Hiace Bus** - To assist with us serving our clients and outreach interventions, Pan Caribbean donated.
- 10. St. James** - The parish is known for its many resorts and beaches which serves as attractions for tourists. This led to an increase in sex work in the parish. In an effort to reduce the spread of HIV and other STIs, JASL started the 'beach boy intervention' geared at promoting condom usage while encouraging HIV testing.

### Nurses:

Nurse 1 - Daunette Wellington- Williams

Nurse 2 - Tonya Clarke-Evans

Nurse 3 - Orchid Gowe-Hunter



WHO RUNS THE WORLD?!... (L-R) THREE OF JASL'S BOSS LADIES, MRS. TRISHA MUIR, ADMINISTRATOR, MS. MICKEL JACKSON, GRANTS MANAGER AND MS. NICOLE MORRIS, REGIONAL PROGRAMMES MANAGER WERE ALL SMILES AT JASL'S 30TH ANNIVERSARY LAUNCH AND STAFF AWARDS.



IN JANUARY OF 2021, JASL HOSTED A PREP ESSENTIAL TRAINING WITH OUR CIVIL SOCIETY PARTNERS TO INCREASE KNOWLEDGE AROUND THE DRUG. PREP IS CURRENTLY BEING OFFERED BY JASL REPRESENTATIVES OF TRANSWAVE PRESENTING (L-R) KYM AND EMANI.

OUR #DWEETS SAFE GIRLS WERE ACTIVATED DURING SAFER SEX WEEK. THEY VISITED VARIOUS COMMUNITIES ISSUING SAFER SEX COMMODITIES. WHICH COLOUR WOULD YOU REP?



YOU ARE NEVER FULLY DRESSED WITHOUT A SMILE... (L-R) MR. JASON FRASER, USAID/JAMAICA COUNTRY REPRESENTATIVE, MS. JOY CRAWFORD, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF EVE FOR LIFE, MRS. KANDASI WALTON-LEVERMORE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF JASL AND MS. ALTHEA SPENCE, PROJECT MANAGEMENT SPECIALIST, USAID.



(L-R) MRS. KANDASI WALTON-LEVERMORE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF JASL WITH MR. JASON FRASER, USAID/JAMAICA COUNTRY REPRESENTATIVE AND DR. NICOLA SKYERS, SENIOR MEDICAL OFFICER, MINISTRY OF HEALTH & WELLNESS AT JASL'S 30TH ANNIVERSARY LAUNCH EVENT.



WE ARE THE CHAMPIONS! THE MONTEGO BAY TEAM COPPED THE PRESTIGIOUS AWARD OF BEST CHAPTER FOR 2020 AT THE RECENTLY HELD LAUNCH AND STAFF AWARD.



HAVE YOU TAKEN YOUR VACCINE JAB YET? OUR MEDICAL DIRECTOR, JENNIFER TOMLINSON WAS ONE OF THE FIRST JASL TEAM MEMBER TO RECEIVE THE COVID-19 VACCINE. SINCE THEN OVER 85% OF THE TEAM HAVE BEEN VACCINATED.



SO MUCH SWAG IN ONE PHOTO! MR. CONROY WILSON, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE ASHE COMPANY PRESENTS A LONG SERVICE AWARD TO DR. ROGELIA WALLACE FROM OUR STANN CHAPTER.



FOUR STRONG WOMEN POSED FOR A PHOTO AT JASL'S VIRTUAL SYMPOSIUM, UNMASKING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN HOSTED ON MARCH 1. CAN YOU NAME ALL THE WOMEN IN THIS PHOTO?



# FLIP ON A CONDOM

AND

## *DweetSafe!*

### TO GET TESTED CONTACT:

**Jamaica AIDS Support For Life**

3 Hendon Drive, Kingston 20

TEL: 876-925-0021-2 // 969-6597 // 969-0282

Kingston Chapter: 876-551-1060 // 376-2084

St Ann's Bay Chapter: 876-462-9682

Montego Bay Chapter: 876-343-5066 // 376-164

[www.jasforlife.org](http://www.jasforlife.org)

Follow us on:

