

# LONG ISLAND PRESS

## Conference Discusses Aging with HIV at Farmingdale State College



*Jennifer McCaffrey, an occupational therapist at VNS Health; Jane Bertsch-Wells, a quality improvement data coordinator at Sun River Health; and Roger Herr, vice president of regional patient care services at VNS Health, attended the HIV and aging conference.*

*Vivian Rose, Sept 29, 2026*

People with diagnosed HIV are living longer, but are experiencing symptoms of aging earlier than other populations.

People 60 and older make up the largest population living with HIV across Long Island, at 36.6%, according to health experts from VNS Health. Jennifer McCaffrey, an occupational therapist, said that as this population ages, they can experience HIV-related fatigue, cognitive decline and increased isolation.

McCaffrey was one of several speakers at the 2026 Conference on Aging with HIV on Long Island, developed by medical experts at Sun River Health, and held at Farmingdale State College on Friday, Sept. 18.

McCaffrey said fatigue and cognitive issues in people living with diagnosed HIV could be exacerbated by certain HIV medications and dealing with multiple medical appointments at a time could contribute to social isolation.

McCaffrey said she works with people who are choosing to “age-in-place” at home, and said clinicians like her try to find worsening aging symptoms and cognitive issues early on. She said that as an occupational therapist, she assesses a patient’s range of motion and their level of function.

“So if the person is having cognitive problems or some deficits, we work on some strategies with the caregiver or even patients themselves,” McCaffrey said. “That could be like putting up a Post-it as a reminder or using a pill organizer so that they remember their pills.”

HIV, or human immunodeficiency virus, can be transmitted from person to person either sexually, through substance use or intravenously from needles, Dr. Aarathi Nagaraja, an infectious disease specialist at Sun River Health, said.

Nagaraja said the virus is universally transmitted and has been found in LGBTQ+ and heterosexual communities.

HIV is not symbiotic with the human genome and tends to weaken the immune system, she said.

Nagaraja said people are asymptomatic until their T cells begin to drop.

“We see a lot of male-to-male, male-to-female,” Nagaraja said. “It’s just a virus that’s been around. We are open organisms that live in an environment where there are bacteria and viruses that we are accustomed to coming into our body and getting out of our body.”

Nagaraja said most people do not realize they are symptomatic until they begin to experience thrush, an oral fungal infection that causes a white film to develop in the mouth.

The virus can develop into AIDS, acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, after a person’s T cells drop to less than 200. T cells, or T lymphocytes, are white blood cells that help protect the body from infections and diseases.

The virus was transmitted widely during the global 1981 AIDS epidemic and caused thousands of deaths. But as prevention medications like PrEP, Truvada and Descovy have been developed, more people are living and aging with HIV, Nagaraja said.

She said that prevention medications are crucial because they keep someone diagnosed with HIV undetectable, which she said means the virus cannot be transmitted.

Although more people with HIV are living longer, there is still a stigma that lingers.

“If somebody goes into a nursing home, or if somebody goes into a hospital, if somebody goes into a pharmaceutical company, or a physical therapy office, or another subspecialty, they might not be as aware,” Nagaraja said. “The care teams might be. But maybe there’s a nurse who’s not aware, or the patient navigator is not aware and so it creates this shock of like, ‘Oh, you’re old with HIV, or you’re older with HIV?’ That’s the stigma judgment.”

***For more than 200 years, The Long Island Press has been serving a passionate audience. Now daily online and monthly with our print news magazine, The Long Island Press provides the latest and most relevant local stories – be it breaking news, entertainment, healthcare, politics and education, or dining, nightlife, real estate and getting around. It reaches an estimated audience of 605,590 through print, digital and social media.***