00:00:06:23 [Jen]: From the California Prevention Training Center in San Francisco. This is Speaking Frankly, the state of sexual health. We know good sexual health. Doesn't just happen. It's created. In this series, we're starting the conversations we should already be having. We'll speak with experts in the field about sex, stigma, and all of the other factors that shape our sexual health and our everyday lives. I'm Jennifer Rogers. Today, we're talking with Dana Cropper, the new director of the California prevention training center after almost three decades. Alice Gandelman is

00:00:39:27 stepping down from her role at the helm of the PTC. Dana comes to the PTC from HealthHIV, where she was director of education. In this episode, we talk with Dana about her new leadership role. What inspired her to enter the fields of HIV and STIs why she loves Oprah and she admires Sojourner Truth and why she thinks to reduce stigma. We must each engage in deep and ongoing. Self-reflection about how we navigate the world. Thanks so

00:01:11:14 much for joining us. I hope you enjoy the episode. Thanks so much for being here. Dana. Thanks for

00:01:18:10 [Dana]: Having me excited. Yeah.

00:01:20:22 [Jen]: It's super exciting for me personally, because obviously you are now the director of the PTC, so that has more day-to-day implications than other guests. So I'm excited to learn more about you and for our audience to also learn more about you. At the same time, you have a wealth of knowledge in the areas of HIV, STI, and social justice, as it pertains to health care. And I just want to know what sucked you into this

00:01:55:25 little world that some people are just like not about it, right? We have some people who don't even like to talk about sex, and then we have us

00:02:05:18 [Dana]: Who can’t shut up about it. Right, right.

00:02:09:08 [Jen]: Within your friend group, you're like the sex person, quote unquote. So how did you get into this field?

00:02:15:07 [Dana]: Like many people probably by accident, but by fate, right? I've always been a person who has been really active around sexual health and just, you know, just really feeling like an advocate about something, almost anything my parents would say. I want it to debate and, you know, advocate everything. Even when I, it was nothing to debate about. And when I was probably about 18 or 19, I had an uncle who I was really

00:02:46:10 close to and he died of HIV related complications. And I would visit him at the hospital. He's at George Washington hospital in, uh, Washington DC. And at the time I was a college student at Howard university and I would go visit him. And I just saw the way people treat him and the isolation and fear. And that was not only from strangers. It was also from some family

00:03:16:02 members as well. And a part of me then made me think, you know what? I really want to do something about educating people. And this was a time we didn't even know enough about HIV. So people were probably rightly scared of the unknown, right. For context. This is what year now you're trying to date me if you have to, if you have to dismiss 1986. Okay. Right. And so scary time,

00:03:48:02 super, super scary, scary time. You know, I was a young person in undergrad and he was just really isolated. And I knew then that I wanted to do some education with people and for people, some of those being my family members and other people. And I also knew that I wanted to make people who were affected, feel secure, supported, and loved. So that got me on the path and

00:04:19:14 everything else just started falling into place kind of haphazardly as life usually does.

00:04:24:17 [Jen]: So you went to Howard, how was that experience for you?

00:04:28:26 [Dana]: Well, well, let me tell you, I've gone to a couple of historically black colleges. I actually graduated from Delaware state university, but I started out at Howard university and any HBC U is a fabulous foundation for people of color. I consider, I think you are going to get a foundation that lets, you know, you are worthy, you should stand up, be seen and be heard. And you're getting that from people who are experts, highly visible well-known people in the field. So I encourage

00:05:04:05 young people, especially young people of color that go get your master's wherever you want. But I really like to get that foundation at HBCU.

00:05:13:24 [Jen]: That's a great story. You definitely lit up. When you were talking about your time at Howard, who inspired you? It definitely sounds like your uncle at the time was a driving force and you wanting to get involved in some way, but who's inspired you and, and really been a mentor, whether you knew them or not along your career.

00:05:35:24 [Dana]: Well, that funny that we tie the Howard piece back Sojourner truth. When I was a freshman at Howard, I stayed at truth hall, which was part of the quad two three Oh nine, but Sojourner truth was an abolitionist and an activist right before people even knew what a women's rights activist that. So somebody likes to join the truth. I've often thought about Harriet Tubman for many, many years. Someone who can go back to the source of their pain and trauma and continually go back there to

00:06:09:12 help other people. It's just fascinating and tremendous to me, Oprah Winfrey, just because of just her tenacity and just the spirit and the inspiration that she provokes because she's open. Right? So we can just say something, if you don't love Oprah, like regard side-eye right. There's something happening. Um, and then I have so many just professional mentors

00:06:40:24 that no one knows their name, but you know, they've supported me and work with me over the decades that I've been in the field. And I've just learned so much from them.

00:06:51:01 [Jen]: So you are making a big shift right now for folks who don't know you, you currently are on the East coast. You've been there for quite a period of time and post pandemic. I'm doing air quotes. I'm not sure when that will qualify to say that we are post pandemic, you'll make the move out to California. And on a personal note, how does that feel? And like at this point in your career, what does that bring up in terms of

00:07:22:02 reflecting on your past or goals for the future? Give me the emotional rundown of how you're doing

00:07:28:05 [Dana]: As you express so well, Jen, thank you. It is, it is a roller coaster. It's a lot to think about, but I know that I just trust in everything that has happened to me in my career, that this is the right path for me. And there are new opportunities in California because everything has led me to this work, right. And led me there. All of my previous work sort of leads me to the California prevention training center for this time and space, whatever this time and space is. There's

00:08:01:27 excitement, there's ooh stress. And this distress, right, when you're thinking about a big move across country, but life is the journey, right? There are so many opportunities. So I just continue to think about, wow, what's next? I think that is what keeps me going, because I'm always curious about what's the next thing. What's the next thing. What's the next thing. And I've never been let down so far, so I'm just prayerful that

00:08:29:18 nothing but good things are gonna happen.

00:08:32:01 [Jen]: It's interesting because just when you think about how we each decide to develop our own professional journey, there's so much trust that goes into it. Right? And it's like, how do you cultivate some type of mantra that works for you? Or what does your trust look like? And how do you follow that? Oprah? Our good friend always says something to the effect of like success is the result of preparedness and like life's chance.

00:09:06:21 Right. But you have to be prepared to when you see chance and you see opportunity, you got to get it right. And so how have you prepared? So it is a really interesting, that's how I tried to look at life, but obviously everybody is different and it's like, what resonates,

00:09:22:22 [Dana]: But you're absolutely right. I mean, you, when the opportunity comes, you have to be ready to step into that. And the way you're ready to step into it is all the milestones and the things that you've done in your past that have prepared you for it. You're absolutely right. And you have to trust the process like I'm an old trainer and trainers always say, trust the process, right. Even when things are happening behind the scenes and you know, people don't know what's going

00:09:50:18 on, it's all going to work out. Just trust the process.

00:09:54:27 [Jen]: I want to ask you, as you take on this role at the PTC, what do you hope to do on a very broad level? Or what are you excited about pursuing?

00:10:09:29 [Dana]: Well, that's a huge question. I think what I'm excited about is that the team at CA PTC is a highly competent, very excellent team that has already produced successful results, wonderful programming. So we definitely are going to continue that because that's the swim lane, right? And I believe in all the abilities of every team member there, because I've seen how strong they are. I've worked with the CA PTC for, I don't know,

00:10:41:23 15, 16 years as an external partner. So that's exciting to know that you're coming to a team that is definitely a solid team and not only solid in their skillsets, but really just believing in the work. I think the other thing that I see broadly and moving forward is that this time probably more so than ever now we are looking at big changes throughout the country. So I

00:11:11:03 think that the CA PTC is really poised to move on equity and anti-racist messaging and programming very intentionally in all of our work moving forward. I think that is where we are. We need to go. I think that we have to be intentional about that because times have shown us that we think people understand and clearly they do not. So making sure that we can

00:11:46:25 incorporate these kinds of messaging into our health education, our training TA, CBA and our clinical programming as well, so that we're making sure that we're talking with two and four culturally competent providers and community providers. I think that's going to be one of the big things that we're really going to be intentional about moving forward.

00:12:10:07 [Jen]: Yeah. I really appreciate that. I think we do such a great job of focusing on the structures that create health, inequity, the structures that create racist environments, the structures that create economic inequities. And because it's from such a structural lens, you can more easily see how those all tie together and race in particular is not in

00:12:40:12 its own lane to be tackled in a silo. Not at all that it's part of a bigger machine. That's a detriment to everyone, not just folks of color. Yes.

00:12:52:14 [Dana]: Right. And I know people can't see me shaking my head, but I'm shaking my head affirmatively. Right,

00:12:59:26 [Jen]: Right, right. Thanks for that. So in that way, how do you see specifically the PTCs work? You obviously have a different perspective as being an agent of change for anti racism, for anti-trans phobia, for the other ring of folks.

00:13:25:24 [Dana]: That's a great question. And our role is to talk about it, integrate it, actually really integrate it into our programming and deliver it and believe it because these messages need to be proliferated and reinforced and just like other people are proliferating and reinforcing the messaging that they think is the best messaging. You know, we're

00:13:59:28 missing the Mark by not doing the same. So we absolutely have to do that. And you know, I'll say intentional 30 times because we have not been. And I mean, I don't mean we as the CAPC. I just mean we as a community of people that believe in equity for everyone have not always had our voices heard or said it loud and clear. We've always just sort of assumed that, you know,

00:14:29:08 there's assimulation and things are going to work out. And I think we just have to be much more, uh, louder, clear, and just reinforce that kind of messaging wherever we are. So that's why I say, even in programs, people saying, how does it relate to health? Well, how does it not relate to health? Um, so let's really be specific about that and talk more about it. It all comes back to the work we've started doing years ago around the

00:14:58:09 social determinants of health. Right? And so that is clearly, you know, we need to continue articulating those messages, right?

00:15:07:09 [Jen]: Thinking about COVID our folks at the PTC have been doing disease intervention for years. And so we were really ready to pivot quickly to take our HIV STI contact tracing and disease investigation model and pivot to, okay, how do we train 10,000 new contact racers and case investigators per Gavin Newsome in the state of California. Right. And so

00:15:39:27 an exciting thing is I believe we're, we're nearly at the 10,000 person Mark, if not a little bit over at this time. And that's happened in the last year. So we have a huge workforce. Now, what do you hope to see happen with that workforce in six months when COVID is hopefully not as much of an imminent threat?

00:16:05:11 [Dana]: Well, hopefully the skills that these people have learned, they probably already had, and then they enhanced or refined some of these skills. These skills are highly transferable in the field of public health in many ways. So maybe many of them can be utilized in other areas. And, you know, even if not in public health, certainly there are. We know now that the more people that have interpersonal skills around how to

00:16:36:08 communicate with people, all types of people, wherever they may be, these people are assets. So hopefully they could be, you know, higher utilized in many different arenas.

00:16:51:10 [Jen]: In this same vein COVID has unfortunately pulled quite a bit of resources away from our STI clinics. So what are your worries around what that means for public health?

00:17:06:01 [Dana]: Our clinics were losing funding even before COVID, unfortunately it's been something that's been going on for a number of years. And of course, a lot of resources went into COVID, but resources had already been drained from STI work for a number of years. Anyway, I think that there still is an opportunity because we have to look at just within the last, what two weeks CDC reported that the STI rates have increased dramatically. I think we hit an all time high once again, like every year

00:17:39:09 we're hitting an all time high, so people clearly have not stopped having sex during COVID. So this just means that spite of everything that has happened, even global pandemics, that we have to continue creating programming, education training. What have you that really speaks about the importance on how to reduce your risk around an STI speaks to people so

00:18:07:19 that they feel like it really is possible for them to protect themselves and also possible for them to get an STI. And we also have to make sure that people not only know about, but have access to high quality care for treatment. And they're getting those services from culturally competent providers. I think that is the, what we need to continue doing now, you

00:18:38:19 know, and hopefully, you know, COVID is going away. We know that, and maybe we can leverage some of those resources into STI programming.

00:18:48:23 [Jen]: We just need more money. We always need more money. It just makes me think when people realize that sexual health is functioning in tandem with the rest of the facets of life, we'll have much more support. I always find that to be the most challenging in terms of messaging is how is this more about respect and care and love and empathy and compassion for one another as fellow human beings than it is about a

00:19:21:22 quote unquote like carnal act of physicality, right?

00:19:26:25 [Dana]: Yeah, no, and you know, I think many of us, and probably not as many as we want sex, well, I'm not even going to get into it, but sex, you know, we're all having sex. Hopefully most of us are. So clearly we need to be much more open about this and about ways that we can create better access for people.

00:19:54:14 [Jen]: So along that line of thinking, what are your primary concerns of the state of sexual health currently? Is it access, is it awareness? Is it implicit bias on the part of clinicians or others?

00:20:08:29 [Dana]: All the above Jen? Uh, it's all the above. I think there is definitely still, we clearly know there are challenges around bias and stigma, and that is not only for people of color. That's not only for same gender loving people. That's also for youth. And we know that there are significant challenges with access to services, even for prevention or

00:20:39:10 family planning services for people, especially depending on geographic areas where you may live. So there are a host of concerns and these concerns have been with us for quite some time. They don't seem to be going away. We continue to have discussions. And I do think that access has improved. I really do think that access has improved. I just don't know how much we've improved around making sure that people are aware of the

00:21:09:25 services and feel comfortable getting those services or accessing the services. The services may be there, but do people feel comfortable accessing those services?

00:21:22:19 [Jen]: Right. Which brings me to the question, what for you, because for, for me, this podcast, certainly, and so much of the work that I do is really trying to crack that nut, if you will. So like what's the root of stigma, right? And how do we address that?

00:21:42:04 [Dana]: You’re not asking me what the root of stigma is. No,

00:21:46:07 [Jen]: I'm going to put it out there. When you think about stigma, like what comes to mind for you? Maybe that's a different way, because for me it's fear of the unknown it's social constructs that have been created that say, you know, cisgender is the way to be, or there's heteronormativity or women have their place. Right. And it's like, what happens if that dissolves? What does that mean to me about me? I think

00:22:15:09 that's kind of petrifying for people to grapple with

00:22:17:25 [Dana]: It is. And there's also this piece of stigma, like internalized stigma, just thinking about people who have been stigmatized and the trauma and experience that they have and how are they walking through their life, the world community interfacing with others when you've already internalized and experience all of this. You know, the fact that we are talking about it is clearly just important and we need many more people

00:22:50:04 to start talking about it and we not only need to start talking about it. We need to start being about it and thinking about how we can reduce and eliminate stigma. And that's going to take us all, really looking at ourselves, thinking about what that means to us, how we navigate through the world and what in our actions thought processes, whatever shows up

00:23:19:24 differently to other people right. Beyond what we actually think it should. So I just think that really takes some strong self reflection.

00:23:28:14 [Dana]: I mean, I'm thinking about, you know, just the work I've done on myself and continue to do on myself and how that has helped me, I think become a better person, but certainly I need to be about that even. So just continuing to work on self. And I think if we all are taking that charge on to really, if we really want to change to really start working on ourselves, then that's the first step. [Jen] switching gears a little bit as a leader

00:24:01:13 in this position. What are the core principles for you when it comes to leadership or your tenants or beliefs? [Dana] Let me just say this. I am a [Jen] and take your time. [Dana] Yeah, yeah, no. I like to rush through, run into burning buildings. I am a very participative person. So I would say that's the kind of leader

00:24:29:02 I am. I believe in collaboration. I believe in the input of people, my tenants are to really collaborate, to be courageous, to be, have communication and dialogue and really create competence. For me, leadership is collaboration. Leadership is communication. Leadership is empathy and

00:25:01:29 leadership is of course leading, right? I like leading by consensus because I think that it's good to involve people in decision-making processes that the outcomes will ultimately affect them. And when people are involved in these processes, they know that their voices are heard, it fosters a buy-in for them. And it really helps us all get on the path to a specific goal of

00:25:35:10 where we want to go. It helps with visioning, if you will. [Jen] similarly, what can clients expect or partners expect to see as you take them?

00:25:48:25 [Dana]: I think they can expect many of the same things that they've already gotten. You've already had fabulous leadership from someone who I think it's a great leader and I've been, you know, a partner with for many years probably have similar styles in some ways, and maybe dissimilar in some other ways, but certainly someone who is open to conversation open to hearing different thoughts and having some dialogue. I think I'm a very opinionated person, but I love for people to win me over. If you will

00:26:24:00 change my thought processes, if you give me a good enough rationale, I can move. And I think that's, what's important about, you know, working with teams and good communication and knowing that right, getting out of your own head and not necessarily thinking that I know right way, because when you get a group of people together, and this is the beauty too, of having diverse teams, right? You get a group of people together with different

00:26:51:07 thought processes in different experiences and backgrounds. If people are open to those kinds of dialogues, it's really easy, easier if you will, to sort of have movement and thought processes right. And changes. But I think all of that is so important. So it comes back to just communication and being open to hearing others. And like I said, I'm collegial and

00:27:19:19 collaborative. So much of that will be the same.

00:27:23:26 [Jen]: I love what you said about dialogue and having people when you over per se, I was reflecting with a colleague the other day about what some of my most positive work experiences in my career have been. And one that topped the list was clearly knowing that your director is your director and there's much respect for that position and all that it encompasses. And there's this idea of being able to respectfully challenge

00:27:57:12 one another ideologically. And for me, that has always been a really rewarding dynamic when it, it comes up because it does foster a sense of trust that my opinion matters. Yes. And you're open to hear it and we all need each other's opinions. Right. And of course, knowing when to step back, because I am not the leader, what's been the most impactful lesson

00:28:23:25 you've learned professionally or personally for that matter.

00:28:27:29 [Dana]: Oh, that's an easy one. Cause the professional is the personal and it's something so basic, you know what it is, Jen, it is treating people the way you want to be treated because I have learned that professionally, our swim lane is very narrow. So the people that you see, we're all in this like incestuous almost circle. So it's really important

00:28:58:29 that you create and maintain strong relationships professionally and personally. And so I fake that has been like the most impactful lesson that I have learned and carried throughout my career. So I can use that professionally as well as personally. And I do,

00:29:19:28 [Jen]: What should we be talking about more when it comes to sex stigma, STI social determines of health that we aren't,

00:29:29:24 [Dana]: Well, clearly we need to be talking more about anti-racist messaging and I think we're starting to really have those discussions. So I think need to, and we need to talk more about that because that's so pervasive through many of them. I think we, in the sexual health arena, think we talk about this stuff all the time. So to say that we, you know, should we be talking about it more? Yes. But we feel like we're talking about it all the time. We're talking amongst ourselves, right. We're talking amongst the congregants and maybe we should be talking

00:30:02:25 outside of the parish and among a lot of other people and figuring out ways that we can best do that. So that it is received. We need to think about our messaging to people who are different than ourselves or the ones that we think are different than ourselves, because we all know how to do this, but I guess we don't talk about it with others email.

00:30:27:10 [Jen]: And that certainly was the impetus for this show is how do we broaden the audience a bit, right. Because we are preaching to the choir, but what about the other folks and how does it apply to their everyday lives? And how do we get our message out in a way that resonates in a way that even at a minimum plant seeds, just to have a conversation that makes someone ponder more in their own time is an effective

00:30:58:27 conversation to have. Right. And how do we do that without making it combative? Right. I know some people would say that there's a role for more aggressive tactics than not, but as we end, what do people need to know about you Dana Cropper? Or would you like folks to know

00:31:19:29 [Dana]: What I would like folks to know? Well, they're at the PTC. And even if they aren't that I am open and available to meet you and learn more about you and tell you more about myself, I would like folks to know that I am a empathetic person. I want people to know that I will always, if I have the information and knowledge awareness of your program,

00:31:53:00 that I will always advocate for what is right and what is the best choice, but to CAPC pants down.

00:32:02:19 [Jen]: Well, I am very, very happy personally, to have you on board. And I'm so grateful that you took time to speak with us today. So folks inside the organization and outside can get to know you better. And I'm really looking forward to watching you and learning from you and with you and collaborating. And I really appreciate you being here and welcome.

00:32:28:03 [Dana]: Thank you. And I appreciate you, Jen, just in the short time that we've known each other, I really appreciate your tenacity and getting it, getting the job done. I really appreciate it. Thank you so much a special thank you again to our guest, Dana Cropper, the new director of the California Prevention Training Center. speaking frankly is a production of the California prevention training center in San Francisco, California. It's produced by me, Jennifer Rogers and Laura Marie Lazar and is edited by Nils Meyers at one five, two West

00:33:01:29 productions.