

Coalition of Rainbow Alliances Monthly Meeting April 12, 2026

Members Present and on Zoom

Brian Sylvester President
Lisa Cotton, Vice President
Sheila Morris Treasurer
Francine Turner Secretary
Rex Schadow Board Member
Lamar Walls Absent
Liv Gray Board Member

Jim Barr
April Poole
Mike Johnson
Candice Clotfelter
Bob Immel
Bert Morton
Lee Korty
Kennedy Gray
April Bell
Jennifer Ross
Kelsey Pedigo
Leo Wilder
Lauren Wilder
Lucas Mazzini
Michelle Cruz Hine
Larry Wassell
Sam Downs

Meeting called to order at 4:00 pm

Approval of minutes from March 08, 2026. Lisa made a motion to accept the minutes, Rex seconded the motion. Motion carried.

Treasurer's Report- Sheila gave a verbal report. Candice made a motion to accept and file for audit, Lisa seconded. Motion carried.

Committee Reports

Membership Committee: Brian announced that Liv Gray will be taking over as the chair of the membership committee effective immediately. Liv has already expressed several ideas for the committee and how it can improve the outreach in the community. Brian is excited to see Liv's fresh new approach.

Communications Committee: Brian reported that we ordinarily see a large rise in social media activity the month of the Ritz and this past month was no exception. Overall, both pages saw increases in visits with the average for the month being over 12,000. There were 52 new followers added to both pages for a combined total of 2,152 followers. There were 48 posts for the month with the top posts being the Ritz announcement on the day of the event with 561 views, the Jacksonville Pridefest announcement with 430, and the Interfaith Anti-racism Training announcement with 309.

The website saw a rise in site visits with 597 with 327 of them being new to the site. The top pages were the Ritz and events pages while the top clicks were all Ritz related. On an unrelated note, AI generated queries saw an increase in CORAL's blog post on the retirement of Jonna Cooley by 400% this month as well.

Finance Committee: Sheila reported that AgeLinc sent a thank you letter for CORAL's participation in the Agelinc Mardi Gras Gala.

Vetting Committee: Mike reported the 2026 Executive Board nominees up for election next month are Vice President Lisa Cotton, unopposed, Secretary Francine Turner, unopposed, for Treasurer is April Poole and Roger Ruth. Member-at-Large 1, Bob Immel, Member-at-Large 2, Olive Gray, Member-at-Large 4, Lamar Walls, Member-at-Large 5, Candice Clotfelder.

Ritz Committee: Bert reported the general consensus was that the Gala was the most relaxed and enjoyable gala in years. All those who helped with the event were thanked for their participation.

Brian stated that he had only one concern from the evening and that was the number of members who left before the evening was over and weren't around to assist with the tear down. It was understandable for some of the members to leave but it was a little disturbing to see guests stepping up to help with it as opposed to the committee members.

Lisa made a motion to accept the committee reports, Candice seconded it.

Partners & Supporters: Lisa reported that the Springfield Police Department has appointed Kayla West as the new LGBTQ+ Police Liaison. There will be an introductory meeting with her from 5:30 pm to 7:30pm. at the community center on April 24th, behind Firehouse No.6. Organizations invited to this meeting are the CORAL Executive Board, Fifth Street Renaissance/SARA Center, AgeLinc/PrideLinc, and the Phoenix Center. Lisa made a motion for CORAL to donate \$50 for refreshments and Rex seconded the motion. The motion was approved.

Brian reported that Equality Illinois has begun a campaign to look to the LGBTQ community to fill positions within the State of Illinois' boards and commissions. There is an application process that has been established as there are many boards and commissions that have open seats that need filled and they are wanting individuals with differing backgrounds to join them. Brian attended a meeting on April 8th to learn more about their efforts and will be designing a campaign on CORAL's social media and website to assist with getting interest.

Brian stated that Levitt AMP has begun their work with this coming Summer's concert schedule. Jay Shanle sent a request to CORAL to ask if we would be interested in joining the Community Row this year. For those who don't know what that is, Community Row is the additional organizations that are NOT hosting the events but have a booth at the concerts for the community to learn more about them. Brian feels that CORAL should continue to be a host for one of the concerts and bypass the Community Row. What is the opinion of others on this? The discussion yielded consensus with Brian.

Chris Reel, Director of Public Affairs at IDHR, has reached out to Lori and Brian about having coffee sometime next week while he is in Springfield. As Lori is out of town, Brian will be meeting with him this week.

Justin Courtney, the young man who spoke at the City council meeting regarding the financial situation at the Phoenix Center, has reached out to Brian about working with CORAL and has requested a meeting to discuss how that might work.

Old Business:

Event Wrap-ups:

Pridefest Prom: This event was on Saturday, April 11th at the Inn at 835 Boutique Hotel, Springfield, IL. CORAL attendees made positive observations about how the event drew in a younger group of people. There was a general consensus that the entertainment and food provided was not as good as previous years. It was noted that due to changes in the pride committee staff, two weeks before the event, the Phoenix center staff did not have much time to finish organizing it. Due to this reason, the event was probably not as good as prior years.

Decatur Pride Dinner: Jim Barr expressed his appreciation to the seven people that made the drive to Decatur for the Pride Dinner at Richland Community College on April 11th, 2026. General agreement was that the food was excellent, but a bit cooler than expected. The venue was spacious enough for the drag performers to move around the table easily and meet with people one to one.

Voices of Zero: Brian reported that this event was in support of a state wide initiative to bring new transmissions of HIV down to less than 100 by 2030. Rex also attended, and they both mentioned how enthusiastic and positive the attendees were in support of this initiative. It was noted there may be obstacles with funding in the future. Personal stories of people living with HIV and their experiences of how HIV policy, advocacy, and systems have impacted their lives.

Play Sponsorship: Brian reminded everyone that in last month's meeting he announced that CORAL was approached by Sean Robb about the possibility of sponsoring a play, "Everyone is Talking About Jamie" with the Springfield Theater Centre in May. He has since spoken with the Phoenix Center about co-collaborating on this and has spoken with Sean about it as well. Sean was going to speak with the board at Springfield Theater to have it approved. At a minimum, CORAL will be advertising the play via social media and the website.

Bond County Pridefest: Brian reported that this event is on April 25th from 2pm to 8pm. In order to show strong support, Coral members were encouraged to rideshare and bring their friends. It will be held in Greenville, IL.

Decatur Pridefest Sponsorship Discussion: This was a continuation of the discussion from last month's meeting. Lisa suggested a \$300 Gold sponsorship based on her impression of the prior year's location of the CORAL table and the attendance at the event. Michael Johnson had suggested last month that a \$600 Platinum would be a good sponsorship level. Lee made a motion to provide a \$1000 Diamond sponsorship at today's meeting. Candace seconded the motion. Brian made a motion to vote on the sponsorship level and the \$1000 Platinum level passed.

NAACP Event 4/17: - will be on April 17th at Pole Barn Chic from 6:00 to 10:00: CORAL bought an ad for the local Springfield NAACP branch. They were very appreciative and responded by stating that CORAL would also be announced as a sponsor for the event as well.

New Business:

Phoenix Center Update meetings: Brian led a discussion to ascertain the concerns of the community about how the Phoenix Center after several media articles were printed in the past several weeks. Former volunteers did not feel that their opinions and suggestions were welcome. Concerns were also brought up about the need for open, transparent publication of the minutes of the board meetings and a more democratic decision-making process. Brian asked for the group to email their questions and concerns to him at the CORAL email address, so that he can get some answers or find out how the Phoenix Center director plans to address these concerns.

Justin Courtney's plea to the City of Springfield council meeting dated 3/17/26

Phoenix Center: Rumors of our death are greatly exaggerated

Commenter at council says LGBTQ center is under threat.

By Dave Dahl March 18, 2026 12:57 pm.

Springfield, IL (CAPITOL CITY NOW) – Springfield's LGBTQ community and resource center, the Phoenix Center, says rumors of its death are greatly exaggerated.

Citizen Justin Courtney, addressing the city council this week, said the center is "at risk of permanently closing. It serves LGBTQ people, people living with HIV and many others in our area, and, honestly, it serves a lot of straight people, too. They, as far as I know, do not ask what your sexual orientation is when you come in for services." Responding via email, interim executive director Teresa Silva said: "Recent public comments suggesting an imminent closure of the center are not accurate. While financial challenges are real, our organization is actively working on solutions and remains committed to serving the community. Our leadership is planning responsibly for all scenarios with a focus on long-term sustainability. Phoenix Center leadership looks forward to keeping the community updated as we move forward."

SJR article dated 3/23/26

Springfield nonprofit loses state funding amid fraud claims

by The State Journal-Register March 26, 2026

SPRINGFIELD – A Springfield nonprofit has had state grant funding frozen by the state, limiting HIV testing and other essential programs. The Phoenix Center has been under investigation from Illinois agencies for more than two years and is now losing funds.

In January of 2024, the Illinois Department of Public Health investigation began an investigation into the Phoenix Center grant use, funded through the department. The investigation in conjunction with Illinois State Police has led to all previous grants the nonprofit received, including HOPWA, the John Pritzker Family Fund, to freeze according to the center.

Alleged fraud

The nonprofit refuses to share why the funds have been withheld, but previous employees say over a decade of state grant fraud led by previous Phoenix Center executive director Jonna Cooley led to the grants being frozen.

Executive director Teresa Silva also believes actions taken by the previous administration led to the funds being frozen. Silva, who took the role as interim into executive director of the center following Cooley's parting, said she couldn't share any additional information on why the more than \$1 million had been frozen until the state investigation is finished.

Two past employees of the center believe that the board of directors knew of IDPH's investigation into grant funding fraud regarding HIV testing before Cooley left the center. Jaime Estell joined The Phoenix Center in August of 2023 as director of housing and was fired as a case manager in December of 2024. Duane Williams, who co-owns Fluid Bar downtown with Estell, previously was hired by the Phoenix Center in 2024 for director of operations.

Williams said at the start of the IDPH investigation in 2024 when he was new to his position, he and Estell were both asked by Cooley to collect papers and exchange documents into different files, before packaging them to be sent away. Williams said it felt off, and told then-board treasurer Gina Snook in late March, before reaching out again to then-board vice president Terry Dobbs, he believed what he had done was destruction of files.

The destruction of files Williams says he was instructed to do is the official reason he and Estell were fired. "We prepared the files for the state to pick up," Williams said. "The two newest employees who were the least involved with any of the grant funding ... I wasn't aware what we were doing was destroying evidence. We were told to."

What was in the files? Estell and Williams both say the core of the investigation revolves around HIV testing grants. When an HIV test is run by an organization, the test is then sent to a type of grant to receive financial aid from the government to provide service to the person.

Williams and Estell allege over the course of 13 years under Cooley, HIV tests were submitted multiple times to more than double funding across five grant types.

"What was happening was each scope, each person, was being entered into multiple grants (they didn't qualify for)," Williams said.

"To keep things simple, Duane (Williams) is an A-1, a white man," Estell continued. "She was taking A-1 tests and putting them into Black men, into drug uses (demographic) when he has never used drugs in his life. So, she was taking this one person and getting multiple funds for them."

The Ryan White CARE and HOPWA services are administered by the IDPH and provides people living with HIV low-income access to housing and support services.

Williams said following his firing at the Phoenix Center in 2024, state general inspector Dave Harmon reached out to him on Jan. 30, 2025.

Both former employees say they just wish the center would have come forward with more transparency earlier and putting the communities main LGBTQ service in peril.

"They had the perfect opportunity to tell the truth, but they have silenced Jaime and I at every possible turn and they're lying to people," Williams said about the whole experience. "What are you actually doing for this community besides throwing parties and hosting after parties at the (Cliques) lining someone else's pockets?"

How much is being withheld from the Phoenix Center?

Since 2023, the Phoenix Center has lost \$1.4 million in grant funding.

In fiscal year 2024, the Phoenix Center financial reporting through an I-990 form had a net loss of \$1,008,036. The net loss comes from operation costs, and in 2024 reported total assets at \$1.7 million on Candid, a nonprofit research tool.

In a 10-year breakdown of finances from the Phoenix Center, government funding dropped from \$1,446,358 in 2023 to \$810,053 in 2024.

The freezing of state funds has been a slow trickle, not an automatic stop. In 2025 Silva said there is no more funding coming through to the organization from the state.

The largest funder was the Pritzker Family Foundation grant, totaling \$550,000.

The Phoenix Center still receives the Sangamon County Narcan Grant, which provides naloxone, a lifesaving opioid overdose kit to hand out, Silva said. The organization also raised \$65,469 through events like PrideFest in 2024.

Phoenix Center response

Vice president of the board Chris Ankrom, board president Josh Wright and Silva all made clear going forward, the Phoenix Center staff want to speak on the situation but just cannot at this time.

All three said the main point going forward was to continue providing services for LGBTQ+ people in the city, and relying on the community for what they need to keep open.

“There is a real liability and irresponsibility in us putting anything out publicly before absolute conclusions are drawn and puts an investigation in real harm,” Silva said. “We are eager for the investigation to wrap up, State police doesn’t operate on any timeline other than their own. People want us to say something but it would be irresponsible and put the investigation in danger.”

There has been restructuring at the Phoenix Center including a new board of directors, as well as checks and balances put in place to “never let something like this happen again.”

The previous board of directors included Snook, Karen Reynolds, Terry Dobbs and Denna Marshall-Hall.

The new administration consists of Wright, Ankrom, Candice Trees and Donnie Killen.

Wright also owns for-profit bar Clique, a gay bar at 411 E. Washington St. in downtown.

“This new leadership recognizes the importance of being transparent,” Silva said.

Jonna Cooley

On Nov. 22, 2024, Cooley retired from her role as executive director at the Phoenix Center after 18 years.

Cooley helped launch PrideFest in 2011 to mark the center’s 10th anniversary.

Before the Phoenix Center, Cooley resigned from Sangamon County Child Advocacy Center under suspicion of alleged misuse of the center’s funds.

Eventually, Cooley pleaded guilty to a single charge of forgery on Feb. 2, 2009, and was sentenced to 30 months probation and fined \$1,500. Cooley also was ordered to pay \$8,000 in restitution.

Williams says before Cooley's leave of the organization, a buyout from IDPH was offered to The Phoenix Center for half a million dollars in penalties in June of 2024 to pay back duplications.

"Jonna refused it," Williams said. "They would have had to remove her, that was one of the stipulations and she wanted to fight it. All of this could have been avoided; they could have gotten off the stop payment list, would have kept their grants but they would have owed the state half a million dollars."

Following her 2024 retirement, Jonna Cooley now works at Illinois College as the Empower Your Life Program Coordinator since early 2025.

Calls made to Cooley were not returned.

Illinois Times article dated 4/9/26

Phoenix Center facing closure

Grant fraud investigation threatens future of 25-year-old LGBTQ+ nonprofit
by [Dean Olsen](#) April 9, 2026

Two years after Sara Bowen-Lasisi began working for the Phoenix Center, she realized the Springfield nonprofit appeared to be overbilling the state for grant-supported HIV testing.

But Bowen-Lasisi said the questionable practice was openly admitted and encouraged by the former executive director, Jonna Cooley.

According to Bowen-Lasisi, Cooley said, "'We were doing the work, so we deserve the money.'"

Bowen-Lasisi told *Illinois Times* that Cooley "didn't think she would be caught. And quite frankly, she never would have been caught."

Bowen-Lasisi, who was assistant director of Phoenix Center before being fired in fall 2023 amid what she called a hostile work environment, said she was the person who exposed the alleged 10-plus years of grant fraud in complaints to the Illinois Department of Public Health and the Office of the Executive Inspector General for the Agencies of the Illinois Governor.

Those complaints apparently are what led the state in May 2024 to suspend about \$1 million in annual grant funding for the center, which provides social, clinical, residential and harm-reduction services to members of the queer community and other at-risk groups throughout central Illinois. The center operates out of a building at 109 E. Lawrence Ave. and at its Out on Second site at 120 E. Scarritt St.

The new executive director told *Illinois Times* that the cutoff of funds, which also has spawned an ongoing criminal investigation by the Illinois State Police focusing on Cooley's conduct, will jeopardize the nonprofit's existence in the next 12 months if the agency's financial quandary isn't resolved. Cooley hasn't been charged with any crimes related to the recent investigations.

“Things weren’t really adding up”

Duane Williams is the co-owner of Fluid, a bar in downtown Springfield that caters to LGBTQ+ clientele, a hairdresser and former operations coordinator of Phoenix Center. He said state officials told the staff and the center’s board in 2024 that the suspected grant fraud amounted to between \$500,000 and \$1 million over a 10-year period.

Williams said Cooley told officials at the time that she and the agency shouldn’t be punished because the overbillings were mistakes that the state should have caught and corrected early on.

“She did everything to blame everybody else,” Williams said of Cooley, whom he used to consider a close friend.

Williams, who volunteered for Phoenix Center before becoming an employee in January 2024, said he lost trust in Cooley. He said he has been interviewed twice by a representative of the inspector general.

Williams was fired in November 2024 for “mishandling and destroying Phoenix Center records in coordination with other Phoenix Center employees without the knowledge or consent of the Phoenix Center Board of Directors,” according to his termination letter.

But Williams said the IG investigator assured him that he wasn’t responsible for the alleged fraud because he was just following orders.

Williams said empty file folders that helped to document the alleged fraud were destroyed at Cooley’s direction before he realized their importance. He and another employee sifted through and organized paper testing records by the state after the fraud investigations began.

Cooley “used me to destroy the evidence,” Williams said. “Once I got behind the walls of the Emerald City, I realized the wizard really wasn’t the wizard, because things weren’t really adding up.”

Karen Reynolds, a research instructor at SIU Medicine, was Phoenix Center’s board president in November 2024 when Williams was fired and when Cooley retired. Reynolds declined comment when contacted by *Illinois Times*. Reynolds would only say she served on the board for eight years, the last two as president, and left the board in January 2026.

Teresa Silva became interim executive director after Cooley, 64, abruptly retired after 18 years at the helm of an organization that, at its peak, operated with a \$1.5 million annual budget and 18 to 20 full-time staff. Silva has worked for the agency since 2022 and was named permanent executive director by the Phoenix Center board in February 2026.

When asked whether Cooley retired under threat of being fired, Silva didn’t address the question directly but offered this reply: “She’s not dumb, right? And so, I think she made some decisions because some decisions were about to be made for her.”

Cooley, a Springfield resident, was paid \$111,440 in 2024, according to Phoenix Center’s most recent IRS 990 report.

Cooley hasn’t been charged with any crimes in connection with the investigations by IDPH, Inspector General and State Police. She didn’t respond to phone messages or a note left on the door of her home, which abuts Lake Springfield, by an *Illinois Times* reporter on March 31.

Cooley was employed by Illinois College in Jacksonville from January 2025 to March 2026, according to IC spokesperson Bryan Leonard. He wouldn't say why Cooley left or what she did at the private college.

Until a few days ago, the college's website listed Cooley as "Empower Your Life Program Coordinator" in the Chesley Health and Wellness Center. Her LinkedIn profile says she holds a master's degree in mental health counseling and a doctorate degree in psychology.



Former Phoenix Center executive director Jonna Cooley sits in front of a computer screen in May 2022 during a training session with Southern Illinois University School of Medicine students regarding LGBTQ+-affirming care.

PHOTO COURTESY SARA BOWEN-LASISI

The State Journal-Register published an article about the alleged grant fraud March 23.

A troubled past

Cooley was first hired by the Phoenix Center in 2006 as its funding development director, and later named executive director, while she was under investigation for allegedly misusing funds at the Sangamon County Child Advocacy Center while she was executive director. The Advocacy Center coordinates investigations of child sexual abuse.

John Kerstein, then-fiscal officer of Phoenix Center's board of directors, defended the hiring of Cooley in 2006. He told *The State Journal-Register* at the time, "I was under the impression that, here in the U.S., you are innocent until proven guilty. She has had a long career in social services and did tremendous things for the Child Advocacy Center."

Kerstein, who posted the \$1,000 bail to get Cooley out of jail after her arrest in 2008, didn't respond to an interview request from *Illinois Times* regarding the ongoing investigations.

Cooley kept her job at Phoenix Center even when she was charged in 2008 with nine felony counts of theft and official misconduct and three felony counts of forgery. According to the *SJ-R*, "Authorities say she requested reimbursement for trips that never happened and improperly used the agency's credit card."

Cooley also kept her job when, as part of a plea deal to settle the case, she pleaded guilty in 2009 to one count of forgery. She was sentenced to 30 months of probation, fined \$1,500 and was ordered to pay \$8,000 in restitution to the Advocacy Center, a department of Sangamon County government.

“People don’t want to admit they got took”

Bowen-Lasisi said she began working for Phoenix Center in 2019 as director of clinical outreach and administered its harm-reduction services, which were ground-breaking in downstate Illinois and probably saved lives. Instructed by Cooley, the staff requested reimbursement for HIV testing in multiple pay-for-performance grants through the state public health department, Bowen-Lasisi said.



Former Phoenix Center operations coordinator Duane Williams, shown in front of Fluid, a bar he co-owns in downtown Springfield, says the center’s leadership shouldn’t have waited so long to be transparent with the public about its financial problems. PHOTO BY ZACH ADAMS

“So essentially for one test, let’s say, I think it was like \$150 for the reimbursement,” Bowen-Lasisi said. “So instead of getting \$150, she would essentially get \$600 if it involved four grants.”

The state’s computer system for submitting reimbursement requests was antiquated and could be easily manipulated by those who wanted to defraud the state, said Bowen-Lasisi, who has been interviewed by state police.

She said she didn’t realize this practice was inappropriate at first. Later, she said she kept doing it because she “believed in the agency” and believed in the agency’s mission, especially its harm-reduction work.

“I’m sad to this day that I’m not doing that, because it was incredible,” Bowen-Lasisi said. Between Phoenix Center’s locations in Springfield and the multi-county rural area, she said the agency was serving 1,000 people each month.

Cooley’s ego loomed large over the staff, Bowen-Lasisi said.

“I don’t think that anybody understands how hostile a work environment we were under,” Bowen-Lasisi said. “Jonna was demeaning, degrading.”

State Police spokesperson Melaney Arnold said in an email that there is an “open and active investigation into allegations of fraud involving the Phoenix Center.”

Arnold added, “IDPH referred the allegations to ISP for investigation. The Inspector General is aware of ISP’s investigation.”

Neil Olson, the Inspector General office’s general counsel, wouldn’t confirm or deny the existence of an investigation. The office can issue administrative penalties and disciplinary actions against state agencies, state employees and nonprofits.

IDPH spokesperson Charity Greene said in an email that IDPH has entered into an agreement with Phoenix Center to recover the disputed funds that have been identified so far. She said the center owes the state about \$600,000.

“IDPH relies on valued partners throughout the state to provide community-based health programming and services to Illinois residents,” Greene said. “Upon discovering discrepancies in billing at the Phoenix Center, IDPH launched an investigation which ultimately stopped payments to the organization. IDPH referred the matter to the Illinois State Police for further investigation.”

Greene added, “IDPH does not tolerate fraudulent actions of grantee organizations. Misusing taxpayer resources – especially funds meant to improve public health among marginalized communities – betrays the mission of the department and its partners. We will work closely with law enforcement as appropriate on next steps.”

Williams, the former operations coordinator, faulted the current leadership of Phoenix Center for not being truthful and open with donors and the rest of the public until recently about the reason for the center’s financial problems.

“People don’t want to admit they got took,” he said.

Silva said it wasn’t the agency’s intention to mislead anyone. But agency officials don’t want to compromise the investigations, she said, so she declined to comment on how the fraud occurred and the statements of previous employees.

But Silva said the center recently received advice on communications and decided to make more public comments.

“There was always a want to be transparent,” she said. “We want to talk about this. We want to tell everything, but we can’t right now.” She added that there was “maybe some misinformation. I’m not sure.”

Silva said the agency submitted to the state a “corrective action plan” in February 2025 that would allow the state to restart grant funding, but state officials haven’t signed off on the plan.

The plan included putting in place policies and procedures to prevent any recurrence of grant fraud, she said. Phoenix Center would hire an accounting firm as a “fiscal agent” to offer additional oversight, she said.

For now, Silva said, the agency is operating with a \$25,000 grant from the Chicago-based Pritzker Foundation for harm reduction, a \$100,000 grant from Sangamon County for Narcan distribution, and private donations.

“We have 10 board members now; eight of them are new,” she said. “We’re relying quite a bit on private donations.”



Former Phoenix Center executive director Jonna Cooley poses with a unicorn during Springfield PrideFest in 2022. PHOTO COURTESY SARA BOWEN-LASISI

But Silva said she knows it may be hard for the public to trust the Phoenix Center again.

“I want people to understand that there has been significant change from the board on down,” she said. “We have every intention to keep up the change and to make things more accessible and inclusive for all people, especially people who did not feel included before.”

The aftermath

According to Williams, Phoenix Center’s board questioned him and Cooley on the same day in November 2024 about the agency’s practices for requesting state reimbursements for HIV testing. It was shortly before Williams was put on administrative leave and then fired.

Later that day, Williams said, Cooley showed up at his Springfield home.

According to Williams, she stood on his front porch and screamed, “What in the hell did you tell them?”

Williams said he replied to Cooley, “Well, I told them the truth.”

He said Cooley then told him, “I fucking lied to them. I’m fired now.”

Williams said Cooley didn’t say what she lied about. Cooley would end up retiring, not being fired.

Williams criticized the board for a lack of oversight, noting that Cooley remained as executive director for almost a year after board members learned about the state investigations.

Many people in the LGBTQ+ community refuse to accept that Phoenix center’s financial problems were of its own making, Williams said. Some blame him, and those rumors have depressed business at Fluid, he said.

Williams questioned whether it’s a conflict of interest for Josh Wright, owner of the downtown bar Clique, to serve as Phoenix Center’s current board president while many social activities are held at Clique and financially benefit the bar. Wright didn’t respond to a request for comment.

Silva said Phoenix Center officials received advice – she wouldn’t say from whom – to avoid hosting events at Fluid because Williams and the bar’s co-owner, Jaime Estell, have been questioned as part of the investigations.

When the investigations are complete, the center would be open to working with Fluid, Silva said.

The alleged grant fraud involving HIV testing may have been small compared with the agency’s overall funding, but it now threatens the future of the 25-year-old organization.

This year’s Springfield PrideFest celebration, which is sponsored every year by Phoenix Center, is self-supporting and will take place May 16 downtown as planned, Silva said. But many other services have seen drastic reductions. Only two full-time employees and a few part-time staff remain. Harm-reduction services such as free clean needles, Narcan and other supplies to help intravenous drug-users avoid overdoses and medical complications so they can live long enough to consider rehabilitation have been downsized.

Harm reduction only is offered in Springfield now, and no longer in the 13 mostly rural counties that were part of Phoenix Center’s territory, including the counties of Menard, Logan, Christian and Morgan.

Thousands of people aren’t getting help, Silva said. The center used to provide 300,000 to 400,000 free needles and syringes each year before cutbacks began in 2024, she said.

And the number of people receiving housing assistance dropped from 30 to 13, Silva said.

Bowen-Lasisi said she hopes Cooley faces criminal charges.

“She’s done a lot of harm in the LGBTQ+ community, a lot of harm in the communities that we served at the Phoenix Center, whether they be people using drugs or residents. ... It’s terrible how she treated people and got away with it. She was so arrogant, and like nothing could ever happen to her, especially from the board. She always referred to them as her board. And there really wasn’t any oversight.”

Bowen-Lasisi said public trust in Phoenix Center has been so damaged by the latest controversy that the organization may need to disband. "This is a burn-down-and-build-back-from-the-ground-up situation," she said.

Williams said, "I don't want our LGBT center to close, but what I do want is to be honest."

Silva said Phoenix Center has name recognition and a connection with clients and the queer community that should be preserved as reforms continue to be put in place. "At the end of the day," she said, "I can go to a funder and say, 'We've got 25 years of experience, and here are all of the amazing things that we're doing.' Or I can go to a funder and say, 'We're brand new, and we don't have anything, any data to back us up, because we can't use the Phoenix Center's data.'

"Lots of people find value in the Phoenix Center."

Dean Olsen is a senior staff writer with Illinois Times. He can be reached at dolsen@illinoistimes.com, 217-679-7810 or www.x.DeanOlsenIT.

This article appears in [April 9-15, 2026](#).

Since these articles have been printed, Brian stated that he has spoken with several individuals involved, including Sara Bowen-Lasisi, Teresa Silva, and Chris Ankrom. Brian has considered writing a piece for the website and social media expressing CORAL's support of the Phoenix Center.

Logan County Pridefest - 6/6 - 4pm-8pm: A motion was made by April to give \$1000 to Logan County Pride to sponsor their Pridefest event. Lee seconded the motion. The motion passed.

Thanksgiving Dinner Venue - 11/21 4pm-10pm: Brian announced that a new venue has been chosen for the Thanksgiving Dinner. It will be held at the remodeled, First Presbyterian Church dining room/kitchen facility.

Jacksonville Pridefest - 5/30 - 12pm-4pm: It will be held at that Twisted Tea Music Hall. This is a free event and the organizers would appreciate the attendance and support of CORAL members and others in the community.

Adopting a Street: April started a discussion about which street to consider adopting, the difficulties and opportunities that come along with working in the community. Members were familiar with many of the 'adoptable' roads, and wanted to know more about what areas were available. Other considerations were which aldermen would be available to contact. Also mentioned was the need to expedite getting a street, so it can be one that CORAL prefers to keep up and that it will be a 3 times a year commitment

Bylaw Changes: A motion for an amendment to the CORAL bylaws has been proposed. This change will allow for new board members, that are replacing those that resigned mid-term, to serve until the end of the old board member's term. The replacement will be eligible for re-election at the end of the term. Lee motioned to change the bylaws to reflect this new rule, and Mike seconded it. The motion passed.

Capitol City Men's Chorus - 5/17, 4pm: From Sea to Shining Sea.' Larry Wassell announced the date and time of the new performance. Tickets to the event can be purchased beforehand or at the door for \$10.00.

Church of the Brethren - 4/30, 5:30pm: Spaghetti Dinner in support of sending students to their national youth conference in Colorado Springs. \$14/adults, \$7/children.

Central Illinois Veteran's Commission - Jim made the motion for CORAL to give \$250 to the Veteran's Commission of Lincoln and April seconded the motion. Motion passed.

Motion to adjourn made by Lisa and seconded by Rex. Meeting ended: 6:15 pm