10 Ways to Improve the International AIDS Conferences

Competing conference HIV2020 offers the recommendations to help #ReclaimTheResponse and engage those affected by HIV.

July 3, 2020 By Trent Straube

The 23rd International AIDS Conference (AIDS 2020), which will be held virtually this year because of COVID-19, kicks off Monday, July 6. And "in the spirit of solidarity," the organizers behind HIV2020, a similar conference, have released a set of 10 recommendations to the AIDS 2020 team. The advice covers structural changes and is relevant to all future international AIDS conferences.

The AIDS conferences organized by the International AIDS Society (IAS) take place every other year in a different city across the globe. When it was announced in 2018 that San Francisco would host AIDS 2020, activists demanded the event be moved off U.S. soil because it wasn't safe for many people affected by HIV—for example, sex workers, Muslims and people who use drugs—to travel to the country.

We demand structural changes to all future #AIDSConference's to ensure that the communities most affected by #HIV have a...

Posted by H I V 2020 on Thursday, July 2, 2020

When IAS held firm to its San Francisco selection, activists protested by launching a competing conference, HIV2020, geared toward community stakeholders in the epidemic. Slated to take place at the same time but in Mexico City, HIV2020 is spearheaded by the Global Network of Sex Work Projects, The International Network of People Who Use Drugs, MPact Global Action for Gay Men's Health and Rights and The Global Network of People Living with HIV.

Fast-forward to our current COVID-19 reality, and both conferences are being held virtually: AIDS 2020 will take place July 6 to 10 (available for a tiered fee), with a free daylong meeting about COVID-19 on the last day. And HIV2020 takes place from July through October on Zoom, with an opening plenary July 6.

> We're working with advocates from around the world to #ReclaimTheResponse from @iasociety's #AIDS2020Virtual which continues to dismiss the key populations most affected by #HIV
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> Join us at @HIV2020 to learn what a community-led conference could look like https://t.co/NqnssEgHTm pic.twitter.com/O8UyJkLw4L
>
> — MPact (@mpactglobal) July 2, 2020

On the eve of the conferences, HIV2020 organizers have released recommendations for the International AIDS Society, spelling out ways the behemoth event can better include and engage people living with and affected by HIV.

"HIV2020 Online has been conceived by and for the communities most impacted by HIV," said Ruth Morgan Thomas of the Global Network of Sex Work Projects, in a press release about the recommendations. "We are challenging business as usual, and we are inviting those in power to reflect on the potential of truly partnering with our communities."

You can read more details about the 10 proposals to IAS on HIV2020.org, but here are the recommendations, as they appear on the website:

1. Limit the size of the conference to no more than 7,500, opening the possibility that more countries from the Global South can competitively bid to host.
2. Disqualify countries with poor human rights records and travel restrictions that bar entry of people living with HIV, gay and bisexual men, people who use drugs, sex workers, transgender people and/or Muslims from hosting the conference.

3. Review the frequency in which the conference occurs. At present, the conference is held biennially, without a clear rationale to support the need to convene that frequently. In consultation with community advocates, frequency of the conference should be determined by:

- Important scientific developments (i.e., new high-impact research) and practice;

- Timing and urgency of policy developments and advocacy opportunities (i.e., to positively influence laws, policies and practices as well as funding).

4. Link the conference to collaboratively developed and community endorsed advocacy priorities.
5. Focus the conference on new high-impact scientific findings, community-led research, novel community-authored program approaches and urgent political issues—i.e., criminalization, stigma and discrimination, as well as pressing developments in the HIV, public health and related fields.
6. Make the conference more participatory, dynamic and inter-/trans-disciplinary by including other fields related to HIV and by introducing greater/more equitable balance between basic, clinical, implementation, community and social research.
7. Ensure equal numbers of researchers, public health professionals, researchers, funders, community advocates and community experts on the conference coordinating committee.
8. Eliminate permanent member status on the conference coordinating committee in favor of a predetermined number of rotating seats designated to each of the above-named categories. Seats designated for advocates must reflect communities most impacted by HIV.
9. Create a standing, community-based participatory action research track that is peer reviewed by other community researchers and community advocates.
10. Improve meaningful engagement of communities living with and most affected by HIV in the development, implementation and evaluation of future conferences and other IAS programs by:

- Adding community advocates and community experts into the IAS's Governing Council; and

- Waiving IAS membership fees for community advocates and community experts who do not or cannot attend conferences due to their associated costs.

The HIV2020.org site also includes social media graphics you can download to help spread the word about the recommendations and #ReclaimTheResponse.

Be sure to check back with POZ for updates about breaking news, scientific reports, speakers and more from both conferences.

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