First, the Bad News

Eight years later, a false positive tests negative.

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Former Oakland, California, ambulance driver Jim Malone, 59, had seen his share of false alarms—but he never thought he'd be one of them. In early 1996, he was told he had HIV. "Let's just say I wasn't surprised," Malone says. "I'd been fooling around [sexually] for a long time." Over the next eight years, Malone lost his father—who died thinking his son's diagnosis was punishment for his behavior—and his own will to live. "I stopped making long-range plans," says Malone, who never needed meds but lost 45 pounds due to depression. "I stopped doing much of anything at all."

In August, his doctor, Richard Karp, delivered the best prognosis imaginable: An earlier doc's error meant he'd been negative all along. "My first reaction was ecstatic," he says, "but I was also mad as hell." The Department of Veteran Affairs regrets the error, and Karp wrote a letter accepting full responsibility. But disqualified from HIV-related benefits, Malone now faces eviction and a heap of bills. And he's got nowhere to turn for moral support, including ASOs. "It's like I don't belong anymore," Malone says.

"We certainly empathize with him," says Karen Pridmore, spokesperson for the Northern California VA Health Care System, "but unfortunately, because humans provide health care, errors do occur." That ain't enough for Malone, who's suing the VA for reparations. "You can't really put a value on time," he admits, "but I want compensation for what happened. I'm just trying to catch up."

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