World AIDS Day at Occupy Wall Street

Demonstrators remind us we have the power to hold politicians and business leaders accountable for HIV/AIDS.

December 12, 2011 By Reed Vreeland

Amid the upbeat political speeches and promises of funding increases that marked World AIDS Day, December 1, a group of 13 protesters wearing Robin Hood garb chained themselves together for a “die-in” that blocked off Broadway near City Hall in Manhattan. The reason? To call attention to the over $13 million that New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg proposed in cuts to HIV/AIDS housing and services this past year. Bloomberg also opposed a 30 percent rent cap for low-income people living with HIV, a program that keeps thousands in their homes and out of the shelter system.

These cuts impact the most vulnerable and marginalized New Yorkers living with HIV, jeopardizing their access to stable housing and lifesaving antiretroviral treatment. The demonstrators’ message to local and international politicians: Talk is cheap! Budgets trump speeches when it comes to fighting HIV/AIDS.

Coordinating the day’s action with an Occupy Wall Street march, the die-in highlighted the fact that funds are available for HIV/AIDS services. Protestors urged politicians to vote “yes” on a New York State millionaires tax and called for a financial speculation tax that could generate billions of dollars from Wall Street. This revenue, in turn, could create jobs and fund domestic and international health programs. One such program is the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, which recently announced that it will be withholding new grants over the next two years because of broken financial promises by donor governments. The Global Fund decision could keep millions of HIV-positive people around the world from receiving treatment.

But HIV funding cuts are also felt locally. And the wealth disparity in the United States—a major target of Occupy Wall Street protests—is not just a matter of income levels. As more Americans live in poverty, they face harsh realities commonly associated with third-world countries: for example, poor nutrition, housing problems, unemployment, lack of health care—and higher rates of HIV. Robin Hood protesters point out that HIV/AIDS is infecting low-income Americans and people of color in greater numbers. For example, a black woman in the United States is over 20 times more likely to die of AIDS than her white counterpart.

In addition, there’s the often-overlooked connection between homelessness and HIV. Up to 70

percent of people living with HIV/AIDS report one or more episodes of housing instability, according a recent Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness report, underlining the added fiscal and health burden that HIV presents. The same report showed that the HIV rate for homeless families is nearly 12 times the national average. The first casualties under Bloomberg's proposed budget cuts would be formerly homeless individuals and families living with HIV.

On World AIDS Day, the Robin Hood demonstrators—representing Housing Works, Health GAP, ACT UP New York, VOCAL-NY and Queerocracy—got arrested to remind everyone that we have the power to hold politicians and business leaders accountable for their role in fighting the HIV epidemic.

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