AIDS Memorial Quilt Goes South

The Change the Pattern initiative kicks off.

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Sections of the AIDS Memorial Quilt are touring the Southern United States as part of an initiative to honor Black and brown lives lost to HIV and to raise awareness of racial disparities that continue to fuel the epidemic.

The Change the Pattern initiative launched in Jackson, Mississippi, September 28 to October 4, with Quilt displays, educational forums, storytelling, advocacy, panel-making and other free programs. The Change the Pattern display and events then moved to other Southern locations.

The multicity initiative is funded by a $2.4 million grant from Gilead Sciences, which manufactures many HIV medications, in partnership with the National AIDS Memorial (NAM), which is the custodian of the Quilt, and the Southern AIDS Coalition.

Eligible organizations received up to $5,000 each to support hosting local quilt-making workshops to ensure that the stories of lost Black and brown lives are captured in newly sewn panels on the Quilt through the Memorial's Call My Name program.

"By creating an empowering message and safe spaces for conversation, we can uplift, inspire, make progress toward ending the HIV epidemic, challenge cultural stigmas and continue the legacy of advocacy that the Quilt represents," said John Cunningham, CEO of NAM, in a press statement.

The events in Jackson included a display of more than 500 hand-stitched panels, many from the region, which marked the largest display of the Quilt in the state. Each block of the Quilt measures 12 feet by 12 feet and is made up of eight 3-foot-by 6-foot panels. Roughly the size of a grave, each panel represents someone lost to the virus.

"Quilt-making has such a deep cultural connection in the Black community and in the South," said

Dafina Ward, executive director of the Southern AIDS Coalition, in a press statement. “We recognize that the disproportionate impact of HIV and AIDS on our communities is woven together by systemic injustices and historic wrongs that must be corrected. The sharing and telling of these powerful stories through the Quilt, coupled with advocacy and open dialogue, can help end HIV-related stigma and bring the stories of those we’ve lost to light.”

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