Attack on “Empire” Star Jussie Smollett Resonates With HIV Community

The Black AIDS Institute and VOCAL-NY show support for the actor/singer.

February 5, 2019 By Trent Straube

Editor’s Note: On February 21, Chicago police said that Jussie Smollet staged the attack mentioned below and turned himself in. He was charged with 16 felony counts related to making a false report. On March 26, prosecutors dropped all criminal charges against Smollett. For details, click here to read this Associated Press update.

Early last week, Jussie Smollett, the openly gay Black star of the Fox TV show Empire, was physically attacked while leaving a Chicago restaurant. The assailants reportedly put a rope around his neck, shouted slurs and threw a chemical substance at him, the Associated Press reports. No arrests have been made, though surveillance video has been released.

On Saturday, February 2, Smollett, who is also an R&B singer, appeared publicly for the first time since the attack. The occasion was his concert in West Hollywood. “The most important thing I can say is ‘Thank you so much, and I’m OK,’” he told the audience. (You can watch a video of the speech above.) The day before his concert, Smollett released a statement via Essence magazine, saying “During times of trauma, grief and pain, there is still a responsibility to lead with love. It’s all I know. And that can’t be kicked out of me.”

Since the attack, Smollett has received an outpouring of support from fans and activists alike—including members of the HIV community.

“Jussie is one of our country’s leading activists who has fought in the face of injustice and stood up for those disenfranchised because of the color of their skin or who they love,” said Raniyah Copeland, president and CEO of the Black AIDS Institute (BAI) in a statement. “We live in a climate where it is increasingly acceptable to partake in violent attacks on Black bodies and the LGBTQ community. We cannot ignore the toxic mixture of violence that specifically affects people at the intersection of these identities.”

According to the BAI statement, Smollett has been a volunteer at BAI since he was a teenager. He has served on the group’s board of directors and helped chair BAI’s annual gala.

Earlier this week the actor Jussie Smollett was attacked in Chicago, and says the attackers used racist and homophobic slurs + put a rope around his neck. NOW: @spokenless, community organizer at @vocalNewYork, talks about its impact the LGBTQ+ community. https://t.co/JE6GnVgu5p

— Brian Lehrer Show (@BrianLehrer) February 1, 2019

Meanwhile, VOCAL-NY (Voices of Community Activists and Leaders New York), a health and justice group, organized a rally in Manhattan on Friday, February 1, to show solidarity with Smollett and to denounce violence against queer communities of color.

Jason Walker, the HIV/AIDS campaigns coordinator at VOCAL-NY, spoke about the rally and about violence against queer people of color, on The Brian Lehrer Show on WNYC, New York's public radio station. You can listen to that here, and you can read more about the rally in this Gay City News article.

.@EmpireFOX takes on HIV. For star @JussieSmollett, a longtime activist, it's personal, "I'm still losing people to AIDS." Last night's episode includes information about #PrEP—the pill to prevent HIV—and treatment as prevention. #KnowledgeIsPower https://t.co/nGCz7hTdQW

— Greater Than AIDS (@GreaterThanAIDS) November 1, 2018

As the above tweet shows, Smollett has also helped promote HIV awareness through his role on Empire. He plays an openly gay character who is dating a man living with HIV. The storyline has brought issues such as pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and undetectable = untransmittable (U=U) to a large audience. For more about that, read "'Empire' Plot Adds HIV, PrEP and Two Black Men in Love."

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/attack-empire-star-jussie-smollett-resonates-hiv-community