Can We Quarantine People Living With HIV?

Georgia lawmaker Betty Price says her statement was “provocative.” Elton John calls it “horrific.”

October 23, 2017

At a committee meeting about barriers to accessing health care, Georgia state lawmaker Betty Price brought up the idea of a quarantine for people with HIV as a way to stop the spread of the virus, Stat News reports. Price is a former anesthesiologist and the wife of Tom Price, who recently resigned as President Trump’s secretary of Health and Human Services.

“I don’t want to say the quarantine word —but I guess I just said it,” the Georgia state representative said during the October 17 meeting. “Is there an ability, since I would guess that public dollars are expended heavily in prophylaxis and treatment of this condition, so we have a public interest in curtailing the spread…. Are there any methods legally that we could do that would curtail the spread?”

She is also on record as saying at the meeting, “It’s almost frightening the number of people who are living that are…carriers with the potential to spread. Whereas in the past, they died more readily, and then at that point, they’re not posing a risk. So we’ve got a huge population posing a risk if they’re not in treatment.”

When the remarks were reported by Project Q Atlanta, they became national headlines.

Elton John, founder of the Elton John AIDS Foundation, released the following statement:

> “Rep. Betty Price’s comments about people living with HIV are horrific, discriminatory and astonishingly ill-informed. As a doctor and elected official from a state where people are still contracting HIV at an alarming rate, Mrs. Price should know better than to demonize people and perpetuate myths that stigmatize people living with HIV.
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> “Her words smack of a dark time when there was little or no information about HIV and people were afraid of each other. Today, thanks to scientific advancements, growing acceptance and love, people living with HIV are living longer, healthier lives. We also know people living with HIV pose no public threat.
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> “We at the Elton John AIDS Foundation, along with several of our partners, are aggressively

> working in Georgia and across the South to expand access to universal testing and treatment, particularly in rural areas. We also are working to dismantle the structural barriers including poverty, inadequate education, persistent HIV stigma, racism, homophobia and transphobia that impede progress. Instead of perpetuating fear and bias, Mrs. Price should educate herself about HIV and use her position of power to provide support, resources and compassion to her constituents. Love is the cure. Not quarantines."

Price issued her own statement in response to her critics. It appeared in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution:

> "During my entire professional career as a physician, my 10+ year service on the Fulton County Health Board, and the numerous public service roles relating to healthcare and medicine in which I have served, I have always strived to preserve the health and safety of patients and the public.
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> "I made a provocative and rhetorical comment as part of a free-flowing conversation which has been taken completely out of context. I do not support a quarantine in this public health challenge and dilemma of undertreated HIV patients. I do, however, wish to light a fire under all of us with responsibility in the public health arena—a fire that will result in resolve and commitment to ensure that all of our fellow citizens with HIV will receive, and adhere to, a treatment regimen that will enhance their quality of life and protect the health of the public."

As Stat News and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report, Georgia has the second-highest rate of new HIV diagnoses in the country in 2015, with young, gay Black men experiencing particularly high rates.

Jeff Graham, executive director of Georgia Equality, told Stat News that Price's original comments were "incredibly disturbing." He added that she had supported legalizing syringe-exchange programs in the past as one way to fight the epidemic, but that the quarantine comments were troubling. "It shows the amount of work that still needs to happen to educate elected officials on the reality of the lives of people living with HIV," Graham said. "I'm hoping Representative Price would be open to sitting down, meeting with folks, hearing how those comments sound, and recognizing that's not the direction we need to go in."

UPDATE: Five HIV and sexually transmitted disease (STD) organizations issued a joint statement in reponse to Price's comments. You can read it in full on AIDS United's POZ blog here.

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