Connected Action

GNP+ works with communities of people living with HIV around the world to make sure their voices are heard.

June 26, 2017 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

Laurel Sprague, PhD, is the executive director of GNP+ (The Global Network of People Living with HIV). The Amsterdam-based organization works to improve the quality of life for all people living with HIV through global advocacy, community strengthening and knowledge management. Sprague took the helm of GNP+ in May, but she's been committed to addressing human rights and social justice issues for more than 25 years.

She formerly worked as a global research fellow on HIV, gender and justice with the HIV Justice Network, an international group focused on ending inappropriate criminalization for nondisclosure, exposure and transmission of HIV. She was also on the UNAIDS Progamme Coordinating Board as a nongovernmental organization delegate for the United States.

Sprague, who was diagnosed with HIV in 1991, is no stranger to GNP+. She previously served as a regional coordinator for the North American affiliate of GNP+ and was also a board member.

Tell us about GNP+'s three major areas of focus.

GNP+ is in the middle of creating a new strategic plan that will guide how we bring all the pieces of our work under an overarching focus. Nothing that we are doing now will be lost, but the way we will approach it will be different as we move forward.

Our global advocacy work has been shaped by consultations done with different communities of people living with HIV across the world. We came up with a pretty big global advocacy agenda, and from that, the first area we focused on was treatment access and access to prevention, care and support with HIV. We're trying to make sure that all people are able to access prevention. We also want treatment for HIV to be offered in ways that are nonstigmatizing and nondiscriminatory so that we can all access the kind of care and support related to the medical treatment that we need.

Second, the human rights part of our work is about the comprehensive quality of life for people living with HIV and the comprehensive ability to live life with dignity. This work deals with fighting stigma, discrimination and criminal laws that target people living with HIV and people who are LGBT, as well as laws that target sex workers and people who use drugs and treat women unfairly.

Laurel SpragueCourtesy of Laurel Sprague

Finally, the knowledge management piece of our work has involved looking at human rights violations, training people with HIV to document human rights violations and sharing what's happening at the national level so that we can bring that information forward. We have gathered an incredible amount of information that we haven't always had the time and capacity to use completely. Moving forward, we want to develop the infrastructure so that we can take all this information and share it and use it in even more powerful ways.

Those three areas of the agenda come together in a framework called Positive Health, Dignity and Prevention (PHDP). It looks at the comprehensiveness of life for people living with HIV and the way in which our treatment, employment, housing, access to sexual reproductive health and rights and so many other things are all interconnected. They create this sort of organic whole that is the picture of our lives and the context within which we have to operate.

What changes are in store for GNP+?

Last November, our board, which was made up of representatives from each region of people living with HIV, made the decision to restructure the board in order to have a better representation of all the key populations of people living with HIV. There will be much more space for the broadest diversity possible among board members and a constant focus of attention on groups that are marginalized.

The next big change is the restructuring of the GNP+ Secretariat. Over the last few years, we have become very project-based, and there is a real commitment to shaping the organization so that we are principles-based. We're committed to setting a vision for how people living with HIV should be able to live in the world and orienting our work around that.

Describe your relationship with local and global groups.

As a global network, GNP+ sometimes serves in a convening role but also offers support toward autonomous networks of people living with HIV.

We primarily work to make tools and resources available. We can link people to training and support that they need and help with the basic processes they need to create a structure, to work with a board, to reach out to funders and things like that. We try to help build capacities so that networks can be stronger on their own.

There's a lot of work around collecting information, sharing it, reporting it and monitoring it, specifically around stigma, human rights violations and criminalization and keeping track of legal and regulatory barriers to HIV testing.

Working at the global level with organizations like UNAIDS, Global Fund, Unitaid and PEPFAR, we do our best to make sure that the needs of people living with HIV worldwide are reflected in their guidelines, best practices and decision making. We then reflect that information and what we learn in global settings back to regional and national levels. We're trying to maintain the clearest picture of what's happening in different regions and countries so that we're able to accurately reflect what's happening out in the world.

What are some of your top concerns?

There's a big challenge in reestablishing the primacy of human rights as a central tenet in addressing HIV and issues around health and health equity broadly. The more biomedical approaches we have to HIV, the more it seems that there's a sense that human rights and decency can fall by the wayside.

Another major priority is access to treatment. I think it's great to report the successes around HIV, but many of us know what it looks like to die of AIDS-related illness. It looks exactly the same now as it did in 1981, and half of the people worldwide who have HIV don't have treatment, which means they're facing exactly what we were all facing in the '80s and early '90s.

We need to figure out what to do to get people the treatment they need. Part of it has to do with reducing stigma and discrimination in health care facilities, but also within our communities. We need to look at the ways that we stigmatize ourselves and one another. We need to commit to creating spaces where there is room for everyone and we can work together.

Another big part of the problem of getting people access to treatment is the price of drugs. We know that GNP+ needs to have a much louder voice, and in many ways, we all need to have a much louder voice to say that it's not acceptable that profits are made on the backs of human

lives in the way that they are right now.

“We do our best to make sure the needs of people living with HIV are reflected.”

How are you absorbing this change?

I’m honored that the board selected me to lead GNP+. It feels like a heavy responsibility, but the weight is lightened by the number of people who have offered support—especially people living with HIV. We’re joining forces and doing it together. We are creating a united movement, and it means the world to me.

What advice can you give to people living with HIV who want to get involved?

I will always be the biggest proponent of getting involved in networks of people living with HIV because that’s made all the difference for me. The best networks to join are your local networks. I can’t think of anything that makes us stronger in terms of both our own self-love and our love for the people in our communities than our networks.

I hope people will also connect with GNP+ through our website or Facebook because we have lots of interesting webinars and information to share. If you can connect with us, then you’ll know what’s happening—you’ll be part of it.

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