Democratic Presidential Hopefuls Discuss HIV at LGBT Town Hall

"Overall, the candidates seemed well informed around HIV/AIDS issues."

October 14, 2019 By Trent Straube

The topic of HIV came up a lot at the recent LGBTQ town hall featuring Democratic presidential candidates. In fact, each of the nine participants fielded a question about the virus, though many seemed to revolve around decriminalization and PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis, the daily pill to prevent HIV).

.@SenAmyKlobuchar not bad on #HIV @ #EqualityTownHall. Gets importance of #PrEP, bringing down drug prices, and the social determinants of health that drive the #HIV epidemic, particularly in communities of color. (@CNN decided to ask the same 3 questions about HIV all night.)

— Scott A. Schoettes (@PozAdvocate) October 11, 2019

Sponsored by CNN and LGBT advocacy group Human Rights Campaign (HRC), transgender activists interrupted the forum several times to bring attention to the murder of transgender people (18 this year), mostly women of color. The protests, though, were peaceful and respected.

.@BlossomCBrown PREACH! My sister Blossom Brown

did the right thing at the #EqualityTownHall “Not one black trans woman, not one black trans man has taken the mic tonight.” This was erasure IMHO. I stand with Blossom and all #TWOC @CNN @HRC @donlemon ??????????????? pic.twitter.com/1ZKXQqsi1n

— Meghan Stabler (@MeghanStabler) October 11, 2019

For general highlights from the forum—spanning topics such as the Equality Act, hate crimes, conversion therapy, homelessness and discrimination—visit HRC.org, search #EqualityTownHall on Twitter or read this roundup on CNN.com. (Did you know about Kamala Harris’s former campaign manager Jim Rivaldo? He was HIV positive and worked for Harvey Milk; he died in 2007, and Harris said he taught her about racial disparities around HIV. She also told the crowd we could end HIV/AIDS within a generation.)

Now, about those HIV-related questions. Activist and former POZ cover subject Tony Valenzuela asked Beto O’Rourke two questions: Would his administration review HIV criminalization laws and end those based on HIV, and how would he help end HIV discrimination and stigma?

.@BetoORourke goes all in on the Government taking back the patent on Truvada, to which the Government contributed, to make PrEP available to everyone at higher risk for HIV. I agree the Government should exercise its rights under such patents. #PrEPForAll

— Scott A. Schoettes (@PozAdvocate) October 11, 2019

What did Valenzuela think of the responses? “Beto didn’t initially answer the question on criminalization. He did adequately cover the topic of access to treatment and PrEP, as did the other candidates. [CNN anchor] Don Lemon had to follow up with Beto to explain that there are dozens of states with HIV criminalization laws that unfairly target positive people. To me, he didn’t

appear to know much about the laws, but he did agree they would be reviewed."

To be fair, though, the topic of decriminalization is very nuanced; even when discussed in terms of science and evidence, it often leads to fear-based responses by the likes of Donald Trump Jr. Some conservative media outlets even promote the narrative that Democratic candidates think it should be legal to knowingly give someone HIV.

> We have to make sure that no hospital or health care provider can discriminate against someone simply because of who they are or whom they love. #EqualityTownHall pic.twitter.com/bVgmfgSA06
>
> — Joe Biden (@JoeBiden) October 11, 2019

Judging by social media posts and HIV listserv conversations, O'Rourke's answer and a few responses from Joe Biden were the rare flubs in an otherwise solid discussion.

> My blood is not welcome in this country. That is based on prejudice, not science. And when I'm president, I will direct the FDA to revise the rules based on evidence and individual risk factors. #EqualityTownHall pic.twitter.com/2lpdDbe8Xz
>
> — Pete Buttigieg (@PeteButtigieg) October 11, 2019

"Overall, the candidates seemed well informed around HIV/AIDS issues," Valenzuela told POZ. "Almost universally, the candidates discussed making sure PrEP was covered by health insurance, including Medicare and Medicaid. Many of them seemed to be aware that Black and brown communities are disproportionately affected by HIV because of systemic issues. The Democratic candidates today are far more educated about LGBTQ and HIV issues than ever. I was left with that distinct impression."

Good answers on #HIV, @ewarren, #EqualityTownHall. Support robust global funding (hi Matthew Rose!), have Gov’t produce generic #HIV meds, and decriminalize #HIV (not sure federal preemption will work for crim laws, generally province of the states, but interesting). #PrEPForAll

— Scott A. Schoettes (@PozAdvocate) October 11, 2019

Scott Schoettes, the HIV project director at Lambda Legal, which advocates for LGBT people and people with HIV and provides legal services, tweeted his reactions throughout the forum.

.@CoryBooker addresses high cost of Truvada and access to PrEP and need for comprehensive, #ScienceNotStigma-based sex education at LGBTQ #EqualityTownHall, demonstrating his facility with HIV-related issues. @LambdaLegal #PrePForAll

— Scott A. Schoettes (@PozAdvocate) October 10, 2019

.@PeteButtigieg discusses role of intersectionality between race & sexual orientation/identity discrimination in perpetuating HIV/AIDS epidemic in the Black community. (Note @JoeBiden: If the candidate,

you need ppl like Mayor Pete and Cory around you.)

#CutTheStigma @blackaids

— Scott A. Schoettes (@PozAdvocate) October 11, 2019

As Vox pointed out in its summary of the town hall: “Every single candidate got a question about HIV transmission, which disproportionately affects gay and bisexual men and trans women, but organizers couldn’t find time for a single question on lesbian issues—like the unique combination of misogyny and homophobia that leads to male violence against lesbians or intimate partner violence within queer women’s relationships. It was a glaring oversight and a missed opportunity.”

Journalist Masha Gessen, who often covers HIV topics, offers an insightful roundup of the town hall at The New Yorker.

Thomas Davis, former @HRC Youth Ambassador, asks @KamalaHarris about what she would do to address HIV & AIDS, which disproportionately affects people of color.

pic.twitter.com/FpQvLmq6YB

— Human Rights Campaign (@HRC) October 11, 2019

If you’d like to know more about the candidates’ positions regarding HIV, read their responses to a survey of 15 questions sent out by AIDS United and the Act Now End AIDS Coalition. To read a POZ article on the survey, click here.

Wondering where the 2020 presidential candidates stand on HIV issues? Check out their responses to the survey we conducted with ACT NOW: END AIDS. @HRC @CNN @CNNPolitics @DNC #HIV #AIDS #2020

#actnow #endAIDS #LGBT pic.twitter.com/oefTzSTJZw

— AIDS United (@AIDS_United) October 10, 2019

And in case you missed it, here's the clip from the town hall that won the internets. It's not HIV-related but definitely worth a view.

How would I respond to someone who says marriage is between one man and one woman? #EqualityTownHall pic.twitter.com/8uNXqXI5n7

— Elizabeth Warren (@ewarren) October 11, 2019

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/democratic-presidential-hopefuls-discuss-hiv-lgbt-town-hall