Ending Racist Systems

In a blog post titled "To End HIV We Must End Racist Systems," AIDS United reminds HIV advocates that it is our responsibility to speak out against structural inequalities and systemic racism. Below is an edited excerpt.

June 29, 2020 By AIDS United

In the first week of March, about a half dozen staff from AIDS United flew to Minneapolis to host an institute focused on syringe services programs in the Midwest.

Over the course of two days, we had fruitful discussions with harm reduction organizations and local health departments on the best ways to provide much-needed services for people who use drugs, and how to do so in ways that respect their autonomy, adhere to best practices and are culturally competent.

At the time, we didn't know that this would be the last plane trip that we would take for months due to the impending impact of COVID-19 across the United States.

We also didn't know that the eyes of the nation and the world would soon be focused on a corner grocery store where George Floyd was brutally and unjustly murdered by a Minneapolis police officer.

Perhaps we can be forgiven for being surprised at the eruption of a once-in-a-century pandemic that would take more than 100,000 lives in the United States over the course of three months, but there can be no such excuse for a failure to anticipate the murder of Floyd. The wanton ending of an unarmed Black man's life by law enforcement over the alleged attempt to use a counterfeit $20 bill was as predictable as the COVID-19 outbreak was unexpected.

When footage of Floyd's death appeared across our smartphones and TV screens, the nation had yet to fully process the horror of Ahmaud Arbery's lynching in Georgia or the weaponization of false white victimhood against Christian Cooper as he tried to peacefully bird-watch in Central Park in New York City.

For their part, the Black communities in Minneapolis and St. Paul were still reeling from the senseless murder of Philando Castile by police three years earlier and from their continued mistreatment at the hands of a fundamentally broken and racist system.

As a result, large swaths of the Twin Cities have been engulfed by both the literal and metaphoric

fires of protest.

As HIV advocates, we have a responsibility to link arms with those in Minneapolis and across the country who are speaking out against police brutality and institutional racism.

The structural inequalities and racist systems that led to Floyd's death by law enforcement are the same ones that are responsible for the obscenely high rate of death from COVID-19 in Black and brown communities in this country, and they are the same systems that have created a disproportionately Black and brown HIV epidemic in America.

In a statement, AIDS United's CEO, Jesse Milan Jr., wrote, "Ending the HIV epidemic in the United States requires acknowledging, discussing and addressing the deep-seated and pervasive role racism plays in the country's failure to achieve health equity, safety and fairness for all."

As an organization, AIDS United pledges to continue placing racial justice at the core of everything we do and to work with other community-based organizations and HIV advocates to fight back against racist violence, racist systems and racist health disparities.

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