



Farewell to Paul Kawata

The executive director of NMAC gives a candid exit interview on his retirement.

August 20, 2025 By [Mark S. King](#)

After nearly four decades of service to the HIV community, Paul Kawata, executive director of [NMAC](#) (formerly the National Minority AIDS Council), is retiring, effective October 7.

It has been a remarkable tenure that includes Kawata's work helping to launch cornerstone convenings, such as the United States Conference on HIV/AIDS, the Biomedical HIV Prevention Summit and the Coalition for Justice and Equality Across Movements.

It comes at a personal cost, however, as Kawata reveals in this candid interview with POZ contributing writer Mark S. King. Here, Kawata addresses personal trauma, the heartbreaking dismantling of our national HIV response and his need to escape the grueling pressures of national leadership to take care of himself.

Paul, I'm hoping you'll be even more candid than usual. Are you game?

I love NMAC too much to get the agency or the movement in any trouble. So let's just say that this is what Paul Kawata, the individual, thinks.

You got it. So how are you feeling right now as you retire?

I am fragile, honestly. I am exhausted. Right now, watching decades of work get taken apart in such a short time has been heartbreaking. It has really been very traumatizing in ways that are different from the early days.

The distress you are expressing right now is what is bubbling up in every HIV community meeting I have attended this year.

We've committed our lives to this. Watching it get decimated has broken my heart. So that's why I say I'm exhausted. I want to give myself time to find my smile again. I used to have fun. I was wild and outrageous. The last months have done me in.

How will you get better?

I am very aware of how broken I am. As professionals in this field, we put on a facade about how well we're handling everything. But now, as a person who is leaving, I want to let people know that it is OK to acknowledge your trauma.

Here's something to make you smile. You have the most whimsical wardrobe of any HIV figure in the country. Your bedazzled sports jackets are legendary.

There was an extraordinary woman named Judy Peabody—a New York socialite and very glamorous. She invited me into her world because her designer friends were dying of AIDS. She wore a fabulous necklace once, and I said I liked it, and she went, "Harry." And I thought, Harry? She meant Harry Winston. She said, "We have to bring a little sparkle into this awful world."

So these jackets are your tribute to Judy.

Yes, to bring beauty into a world that was ugly. I sold all those jackets. I gave the money to a suicide hotline.

Here's a lightning round of statements for you to complete for me. "My biggest out-of-body moment during my years of work was when..."

When my friend Michael Hirsch died. He was the founder of the New York People with AIDS Coalition and one of the first to take me under his wing. I remember holding his hand when they turned the machine off, and a single tear rolled down his cheek. He would always sign his letters "Yours in the struggle," and I sign all my emails that way.

"We will not end this epidemic without..."

A new election.

"The most common mistake organizational leaders make is..."

To not heal themselves. To take on all of the stuff and try to fix the world. If I've learned anything this year, it is that it is not my fault.

I was in a meeting with you and other agencies once, and at one point, you asked the group, "What's in it for the constituencies NMAC represents?" It was a stark statement. I admired it.

What we're seeing right now is that large segments of our community will be decimated by the cuts coming. What differentiates the people is the color of their skin, their sexual orientation, their gender identity. What most of us thought was litigated is being relitigated. We're in this tidal wave. The efforts to get rid of diversity, equity and inclusion are all about racism.

What should our long-range strategy be?

First, you've got to vote. Like we've never turned out before. Second, we have to understand that this is not forever. There was a time when I thought if I had to go to another funeral, I wasn't going to make it. We made it through. This is so much bigger than any of us. We are fighting for justice. The third thing is technology. We have a whole new set of technologies in the pipeline. Imagine when we have an at-home viral load test, etc. Technology is going to make this better. I hope it will be in time.

We all have regrets. I won't make you list any of yours.

Hey, honey, I can list plenty. If anyone says they didn't make mistakes, they're lying.

But how does a leader like you set aside their missteps and keep plugging away?

Therapy. A good therapist will tell you when you are full of shit.

A therapist once ended our session by telling me, "I think our work together has come to an end, as much as I would like to continue discussing your blog."

That's a good therapist.

You are HIV negative, correct? I am very happy for you about that.

Yes. I don't talk about it very much. I thought if I said I was negative it would imply stigma against HIV-positive people. When I was asked to be part of the original NAPWA [National Association of People with AIDS], Michael Callen said to me, "We need someone to live to tell our story."

A lot of organizations lose a beloved executive director and then things get rocky for the next person. How can organizations carry on without putting the new director in an impossible position?

I was worried about this. I spent time looking for my successor. I worked hard to help find someone capable and even better than me. The decision was up to our board of directors. We are in transition planning now.

What will you be doing the week after you officially retire?

The best thing I can do is go away and shut the fuck up. I need a minimum of six months on a beach.

Do you have a boyfriend? You need someone on that beach beside you.

Someone I loved dearly died early in the epidemic....

You're getting quiet. Paul, are you OK?

This is the trauma of the work. I fell in love with somebody who died early on. I dated afterward, and all of them died.

I definitely hear you. I dated someone in the early years who was HIV negative, and he finally told me, "I lost someone. I can't do it again." And that was it. And I couldn't argue with that. Oh, Paul, now you're going to get us both crying.

When you go through that kind of loss you can't heal.

Let's carry on. A lot of advocates reading this may have been very young—or not have been born—when you started at NMAC. What is your parting message to them as they begin their journey in the HIV arena?

First, if we can do it, anybody can do it. This is one of those careers where until you're down in the mud, you can't understand. Second, there are other jobs in the world. Be sure you want this. It

takes your heart and soul. No matter how successful you are, we still live in a world with homophobia and racism and sexism. This work sits at the epicenter of all those issues.

This seems insufficient, Paul, but allow me to thank you for your service to our community.

I got so much more out of this than I ever gave. I didn't expect to have such a big life. I was supposed to be a dentist! I was in dental school. Can you imagine the hell my life would have been if I had been a dentist?

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