The HIV Community Says Hello to San Juan!

In a blog post titled "USCHA Is On!" NMAC executive director Paul Kawata shared the news that the 2022 United States Conference on HIV/AIDS would proceed despite Hurricane Fiona. Here is an edited excerpt.

November 14, 2022 By Paul Kawata

NMAC would never knowingly put constituents in danger. The decision to proceed with the 2022 United States Conference on HIV/AIDS (USCHA) was made in consultation with the members of the local host committee. They've spent years working to bring the meeting to their city. The host committee is sensible and empathetic with all the people affected by Hurricane Fiona, particularly people living with HIV and AIDS and their families and community-based HIV organizations and their workers.

The committee members believe that USCHA is part of the strategies for ending the HIV epidemic. They also believe that the entire HIV community in Puerto Rico would greatly benefit from all that the conference provides via exchange of strategies as well as ideas and experiences learned from struggles such as this one. Additionally, people need to feel supported, and canceling the conference would send a very different message.

USCHA is the largest meeting to happen in San Juan since COVID-19. Since the airport, convention center and our 10 hotels are ready and excited for us to arrive, NMAC and the host committee want to support the workers and the local economy—even if only modestly compared with the need—during this difficult time. We understand that some might not be ready to travel. However, we hope you will join us and support the San Juan community and the people living with HIV and their communities outside the capital city.

A few constituents shared concerns about the optics of visitors traveling to San Juan while so many are suffering. The host committee said optics go both ways. No question, San Juan and Puerto Rico are hurting. Is it better to cancel and avoid those optics or carry on and support the local economy? The meeting will pull the curtain back so attendees can learn about the real San Juan.

The region was in trouble before Fiona; the storm only exacerbated the inequities. According to The Atlantic, “approximately 43% of all Puerto Ricans live below the poverty line and struggle to find work. The median household income is $21,058, less than half the median income in Mississippi, the poorest American state.”

We also understand that, once again, the world has changed. USCHA won’t be the same meeting. Here are some of the ways we are pivoting:

In the aftermath of Hurricane Fiona, it was important to also support HIV service organizations impacted by the storm, especially those on the west and south sides of the main island. Gilead Sciences has committed $500,000 to this effort. AIDS United will oversee the fund to help rebuild agencies. Together, we will approach other HIV donors to rally support for nonprofit community-based HIV services.

Coaí, a local AIDS service organization, created a fund that directly supports people living with HIV who were impacted by Fiona. We are asking the HIV community, particularly people attending USCHA, to consider donating. NMAC will match the money raised by conference participants. Corporate money will help rebuild organizations; community support will go directly to people living with HIV and AIDS.

One of the biggest challenges to leadership is making the right decision when the pathway is not clear. NMAC will never put constituents in danger, but we also don’t shy away from a fight, especially when it’s a fight for community. The HIV movement is so much more than AIDS Inc.

We are a family whose members look out for one another. While thoughts and prayers are nice, as you have read, locals need the jobs that USCHA helps support. Local small businesses, particularly LGBTQ bars and restaurants, will also greatly benefit during USCHA. Attendees also need to be sensitive to the reality that this is a community in trauma. Now more than ever, we all need and deserve kindness.

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