HIV Activists Arrested at Speaker McCarthy's DC Office

Activists with Housing Works and Health GAP urge Congress to re-authorize the global AIDS program PEPFAR.

September 11, 2023 By Trent Straube

At least seven HIV activists, including leaders of Housing Works and Health GAP, were arrested Monday at the Washington, DC, office of Speaker Kevin McCarthy, where they were demanding Congress re-authorize the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR).

According to tweets from the HIV organizations, the arrested protesters included Health GAP executive director Asia Russell and Housing Works CEO Charles King.

> As activists from @housingworks and @HealthGAP are arrested in an act of civil disobedience in Speaker McCarthy's office, a reminder that @PEPFAR exists today because of brave activist direct action targeting duty bearers. Proud of activists! #ProudofPEPFAR pic.twitter.com/rvXHosjupb
>
> — Health GAP (@HealthGAP) September 11, 2023

The activists occupied the speaker's office to raise awareness of the need for a clean, five-year reauthorization of PEPFAR. Launched by Republican President George W. Bush in 2003, PEPFAR has saved an estimated 25 million lives, mostly in Africa. PEPFAR spans more than 50 countries and is funded at nearly $7 billion each year. On January 28, PEPFAR celebrated 20 years.

"Extremists in the House have sunk to a new low," posted Health GAP on X, formerly Twitter.

“Never in the twenty-year history of @PEPFAR have lawmakers pulled such outrageous stunts. Activists showed up today to demand a 5-year reauthorization of PEPFAR in its current form and full funding for US HIV programs #ProudofPEPFAR.”

> NOW: 7 activists including Housing Works CEO @HWCharlesKing and @HealthGAP Executive Director Asia Russell are being arrested at @SpeakerMcCarthy’s D.C. office, calling on him to PASS PEPFAR NOW with a clean 5-year authorization pic.twitter.com/2jrf71Owvd
> — Housing Works (@housingworks) September 11, 2023

One of the most success global health programs ever, PEPFAR has also enjoyed two decades of bipartisan support. This year, however, the fight over abortion rights threatens the HIV program’s future, as Republican lawmakers claim that PEPFAR funding is indirectly supporting abortions. For more background, see “Culture Wars Threaten U.S. Global AIDS Program PEPFAR.”

“PEPFAR has saved millions of lives. It is criminal for some members of Congress to treat it as a political football,” said Housing Works’ King in a statement about the protests. “AIDS isn’t over until it’s over for everyone. PEPFAR has been essential to helping people in developing countries flatten the curve of HIV transmission. The United States has committed to the international goal of ending AIDS by 2030, and we cannot do that if PEPFAR is threatened."

King continued: “Haiti relies on PEPFAR funding for all of its HIV treatment. Housing Works is intimately involved in monitoring the distribution of [HIV treatment] in Haiti, which are 100% funded through PEPFAR, so we are acutely aware of the risk posed by any threat to the funding of this vital program.”

“House Republicans are playing political games with the lives of countless adults, children and newborns with HIV and most affected by HIV across the globe and here in the U.S.,” added Health GAP’s Asia Russell. “Extremists in the House have sunk to a new low. Never in the twenty-year history of PEPFAR have lawmakers pulled such outrageous stunts. We demand a 5-year reauthorization of PEPFAR in its current form, and full funding for HIV treatment and prevention programs in the U.S.”

According to the statement, the following activists were arrested:

- Charles King, CEO, Housing Works
- Asia Russell, Executive Director, Health GAP
- Matthew Bernardo, President, Housing Works
- Dr. Archie Jao, Medical Director of Housing Works Community Health Center, Housing Works
- Rosalind Casillas, Case Manager, Housing Works
- Darnell Smith, Client, Housing Works
- Jewel Allred, VP of Human Resources, Housing Work

In related news, HIV leaders converged on Capitol Hill last week to #SaveHIVFunding, including for domestic programs. That September 5 event coincided with the annual U.S. Conference on HIV/AIDS (USCHA), which was held in Washington, DC.

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