



Hope and Healing

Shameka Parrish-Wright, executive director of Vocal-KY, says warding off burnout is essential for anyone in the HIV activist space.

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Shameka Parrish-Wright has spent her entire career caring for people living with HIV and AIDS. She's currently the executive director of [Vocal-KY](#), a grassroots group based in Louisville, Kentucky, devoted to "ending AIDS, the drug war, mass incarceration and homelessness."

Before that, Parrish-Wright held several leadership posts at [The Bail Project](#), a nonprofit organization that combats mass incarceration by paying bail for people who can't afford it.

In 2023, after 25 years of fighting for those on the margins, Parrish-Wright ran for a seat on the Louisville City Council and won.

"I came into office with the activist/organizer hat, so now we're trying to work on policies that save and improve lives," says Parrish-Wright. "I have never tested positive for HIV, but I lost a lot to this disease. This has been a lifelong cause that I've been a part of because loved ones were dying from AIDS in the '80s. I remember going to the hospital and not understanding how the opioid crisis that plagued my family—and then crack cocaine—bled over into HIV and AIDS. All these issues overlap."

Many of Parrish-Wright's clients and constituents are more vulnerable than ever as a result of President Donald Trump's budget priorities.

"Every day, it weighs heavy," she explains. "I wake up sad about people losing benefits. I just got back from Washington, DC, trying to convince our elected officials, using every hat I wear, that if we don't do something to protect vulnerable people living with HIV, people will die. So I pray, I write, I sing, I dance. And sometimes I just sit in my car, and I cry."

Parrish-Wright mentioned burnout several times during her interview with POZ. She says warding

off burnout is essential for anyone in the HIV activist space.

“I need to make sure I’m being real with what I can accomplish,” she says. “But we’ve seen what it means when people get the resources and the medical attention they need. That’s what motivates me. I heal watching that.”

Trump’s hostility toward social justice activism won’t deter Parrish-Wright. She remains committed to fighting for those living with or at risk for HIV, including poor people languishing in jail because they can’t post bail.

“Sometimes people sit in jail two, three, four years waiting to go to court,” she explains. “When they’re acquitted, there’s no help for them. They’ve lost their home; their health has suffered. And then to take this work we do with Vocal-KY and to show up at the [Kentucky State] Capitol and advocate for people who are still incarcerated, for the restoration of their voting rights, that is why I show up. You have to know your why.”

For Parrish-Wright, showing up also means endeavoring to decriminalize sex work in Kentucky.

“At the core of our work is the ACT UP movement,” she says. “That’s where Vocal-KY drew inspiration over 25 years ago, and it morphed into all the other social justice issues. But it really started out of the AIDS movement. And it would dishonor that legacy if I didn’t let Vocal-KY lead the ongoing HIV policy and advocacy work in Kentucky.”