What's the Most Important Thing HIV Charities Can Do Right Now?

Elton John and David Furnish discuss philanthropy and the future of their AIDS foundation.

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Last fall, the Elton John AIDS Foundation (EJAF) announced it was integrating its U.K. and U.S. efforts into one global team to better help its grantees and partners. Sir Elton John and his husband, David Furnish, recently sat down with The Chronicle of Philanthropy to further discuss that streamlining process and the challenges facing HIV/AIDS charities today.

Since John launched the nonprofit 25 years ago, it has raised more than $400 million. The spotlight on John and his foundation will surely shine brighter as the biopic Rocketman opens May 31.

When asked by the Chronicle about the reasons for the foundation's new structure, John responded: "Ultimately, the people most vulnerable to HIV are receiving a disproportionately small amount of support. We want to double down on those who need the most. This includes transgender women, sex workers, people who inject drugs, adolescents, gay men and other MSM (men who have sex with men) as well as the sexual partners of these groups. We need to make sure these groups know the facts and aren't afraid of getting tested or going on antiretroviral treatment."

He also stressed that although the epidemics in Africa, Eastern Europe and Central Asia are large areas of focus, cities in the United States also have a big role to play in building collaborations—particularly in fighting stigma.

"Legalizing gay marriage helped [fight stigma]," John said, "but there is still a long way to go before people, especially in the South, are comfortable being out not only about their sexuality but about their status—and are willing to seek out testing and treatment."

Addressing new challenges and what philanthropy should prioritize in today's environment, John said: "Education is always an evolving challenge. People need to be willing to get tested and rigorously stay on treatment. There are a lot of obstacles still in the way of making that a reality, from stigma to lack of access to health care."

"Working together is the most important thing for the philanthropy community right now," added Furnish. "A problem as big as AIDS has many fronts. Public education, better access to health care,

culture, government policy—these all play a part in ending AIDS. As funders, we need to understand what's driving new infections and address that in a coordinated way. By targeting our efforts, we can support strategies that have the best chance at making the biggest impact."

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