



Never Silent

Kal Gajraj, PhD, of CAN Community Health, emphasizes the importance of World AIDS Day.

February 16, 2026 By Kal Gajraj

The U.S. federal government quietly chose not to mark World AIDS Day, a global day of remembrance, solidarity and spotlight to the ongoing HIV epidemic observed each December 1. It's the first time the United States has not participated since the World Health Organization created this day in 1988 to remember the millions of people who have died of AIDS-related illnesses and recommit to fighting the epidemic that still claims the lives of more than half a million people each year.

According to reporting based on internal State Department guidance, agency employees and grantees were told to “refrain from publicly promoting World AIDS Day through any communication channels,” and a senior official framed the changes as part of a policy to avoid observance messaging on commemorative days. Reportedly, this administration states that “an awareness day is not a strategy.”

As a public health organization that sits on the front lines of lifesaving services, CAN Community Health knows that World AIDS Day is far more than just an awareness day. It's a focal point for outreach, expanded testing and remembrances. It's also an opportune time to release data that help target resources and reach communities as well as a chance to spotlight policy or funding decisions that materially affect access to care.

Muting that focal point hinders work that's already difficult and underfunded. It removes a trusted moment when the government historically amplified commitments and resources.

HIV remains an urgent public health issue. In 2023, there were roughly 39,000 new cases nationwide; the South continues to shoulder a disproportionate burden. Surveillance data show progress in some areas, but persistent disparities by race, age and geography require continued attention and resources.

Our neighbors, friends, coworkers and chosen families see World AIDS Day as a time of visibility.

These numbers represent real people.

The White House’s public explanation for not observing World AIDS Day, as reported in the media, is twofold: a desire to avoid “commemorative day” messaging and a view that awareness days are not a public health strategy. These points miss how awareness days function in practice. As I mentioned, historically, World AIDS Day has been a platform for announcing funding commitments, launching targeted outreach campaigns, releasing surveillance data that drive decision-making and reducing stigma through visible leadership. This decision also arrives at a policy moment when the federal posture on global and domestic HIV programs is shifting, including reduced engagement with international health institutions and funding changes that advocates warn will have immeasurable consequences.

In response, CAN Community Health will not be silent. We continue to mark World AIDS Day with our patients and partners through events, sponsorships, social media and outreach. In 2025, our “No Day But Today” concert series with Broadway Rent stars Anthony Rapp and Adam Pascal brought communities together in both Fort Lauderdale and Tampa.

Removing World AIDS Day from the calendar of public commemoration doesn’t erase the virus. It simply removes one important, proven lever we use to keep people protected, educated and seen. At CAN Community Health, we’ll continue to keep using every lever available—be it data, medical breakthroughs, local partnerships or innovative campaigns—until HIV is no longer a public health threat.

Because World AIDS Day alone is not an entire public health strategy, but neither is silence.

Kal Gajraj, PhD, is the senior vice president and chief marketing officer of [CAN Community Health](#), which offers HIV services across Florida as well as in select cities in Arizona, Nevada, South Carolina, Texas and Virginia.