NYC Gets Its First Openly HIV-Positive City Council Speaker

Corey Johnson has served as chair of the City Council's health committee and worked on the Ending the AIDS Epidemic by 2020 strategy.

January 4, 2018 By Trent Straube

Democrat Corey Johnson was elected the speaker of the New York City Council, making him the first openly HIV-positive person to hold the post, reports the New York Daily News.

Johnson, who is gay, represents a western district of Manhattan that includes Chelsea, Greenwich Village and Hell's Kitchen. He has served as chair of the City Council's health committee, where he has been instrumental in the city and state partnership Ending the AIDS Epidemic by 2020.

Johnson "cares deeply about people living with and affected by HIV and AIDS," said Kelsey Louie, CEO of AIDS service organization GMHC in a statement. "As our district's New York City Council member, Corey Johnson has been an indispensable supporter of the work GMHC does every day for our 12,000 annual clients who come from all over New York City.... And as the city's first openly HIV-positive speaker of the City Council, he understands firsthand the importance of the dedicated services we provide. We congratulate Corey on his new role and are thrilled to continue working with him to end the AIDS epidemic in New York State by 2020."

The Daily News reports that Johnson had pretty much secured the job after earning the support of the Bronx and Queens Democratic parties. The biggest opposition to and criticism against him was based on the fact that he is a white man and that the City Council has not had a Black or Asian speaker.

During the 2016 election year, POZ highlighted several HIV-positive politicians and advocates, including Johnson, then a City Council member. "I feel a real responsibility, and I would say a positive burden that I have to be a fighter and voice for people living with HIV and AIDS," he told us at the time. "That means everyone of any race, of any ethnicity, of any sexual orientation or gender identity and, most importantly, of any socioeconomic status."

Johnson first ran for the City Council in 2013. During the height of the AIDS epidemic, that seat was occupied by Tom Duane, who in 1991 became one of the first openly HIV-positive political candidates in the nation (he won and later became a state senator).

Johnson befriended Duane, who became a mentor of sorts. According to a New York Times profile from 2013, as Johnson was deciding to run for the seat, Duane asked him, “How are we going to handle your HIV status? Have you told your mother?” As it turns out, Johnson had not. As was the case with Duane, it was a rising political career that brought the issue out into the open.

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