Positive Organizing

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As a young gay Latino man growing up during the early days of the epidemic, Julio Fonseca was aware of HIV advocacy. But his interest in the field was sparked while he was working for the nonprofit group Mental Health America.

“In Florida, our chapters were working with HIV activists and communities to ensure that behavioral health drugs and antiretrovirals were not taken off the state formulary,” recalls Fonseca, who is based in Washington, DC. “I went down to Florida and helped set up a meeting where these two different groups came together.” The HIV activists inspired him.

But the real impetus to join their fight came when Fonseca tested positive for the virus and realized he had the passion, voice and experience needed for a career in HIV advocacy.

In 2010, he became a program manager at the HIV Medicine Association (HIVMA), helping to provide support to physicians interested in doing work within the HIV field.

Fonseca then spent three years at HealthHIV, where he was instrumental in implementing its HIV Workforce Capacity Building Initiative, a program that paired HIV experts with health care providers. In 2013, he publicly disclosed his HIV status. “It was important to be honest,” he recalls, “and to have a face out in the community.”

Shortly thereafter, Fonseca received the ADAP Emerging Leader of the Year award from the ADAP Advocacy Association (aaa+). (ADAP, the AIDS Drug Assistance Program, provides HIV medications for low-income people.)

Around that same time, Fonseca became a mentor to newly diagnosed individuals at Whitman-Walker Health, located in the nation’s capital. So far, he’s had three mentees.

This position led DC’s then-Mayor Vincent Gray to appoint him to the Metropolitan Washington Regional Ryan White Planning Council, which allocates resources from the Ryan White Program to eligible metropolitan areas. In 2015, when a new mayor took office, Fonseca was chosen to return to the council, whose Consumer Access Committee he now cochairs.

Fonseca currently serves as a program manager for AIDS United’s Positive Organizing Project (POP), which is funded by Gilead Sciences. He works closely with the pharma giant to award grants to organizations that engage people living with HIV through policies that address stigma, education and advocacy. He is also the project coordinator for Partnering and Communicating

Together to Act Against AIDS (PACT), a partnership funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“Moving forward, I really want to continue to see us as HIV advocates uphold the mission and the work,” Fonseca says. “It’s possible—with investment of time, energy and political will.”

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