



The Power of Choice

In an opinion piece titled “HIV, Democracy and the Power of Choice,” advocates Venton Jones and Kelley Robinson argue that choice sustains freedom and saves lives. Below is an edited excerpt.

November 10, 2025 By Venton Jones and Kelley Robinson

In Texas, we stand at a decisive crossroads, where public health and democracy intersect, collide and demand bold leadership. From Dallas to communities across this state, we see parallels that hold the keys to overcoming the challenges we face—from the HIV epidemic to attacks on our democracy through gerrymandering. Texas is facing one of the worst public health outbreaks in the nation and still lags in responding to the ongoing HIV crisis. And yet in this moment, we also witness the power of communities rising.

Texas tells a story of struggle, yes—but more importantly, it tells a story of hope. It reminds us of the grit, the long game and the unshakable tradition of a people who have always overcome. When the voices of those impacted are heard, when they lead, we all move closer to a future where health, equity and democracy truly belong not just to some of us but to all of us! In these times of crisis, it is our shared strength that allows us to rise—and rise we will.

The HIV response was never just about medicine. It was about dignity. Access to testing, treatment and prevention changed the trajectory of the epidemic only when people had the ability to choose—when individuals could decide to get tested, to take PrEP [pre-exposure prophylaxis], to begin treatment and to live openly without fear. These choices were not imposed; they were offered, respected and protected. That access, rooted in human rights, is what shifted HIV from a crisis to a manageable condition for millions.

We also know that choice means nothing without trust. HIV taught us that stigma, misinformation and institutional neglect can undo the best scientific advances. Communities impacted—Black and brown people, LGBTQ+ people, people living in the South—often faced systems that failed them. But it was precisely those communities, organizing and demanding action, that drove forward an evidence-based, compassionate response. That’s a lesson democracy must take to heart.

Democracy, like public health, thrives when people have the tools and the trust to participate. Voting and civic engagement are the democratic equivalent of testing and treatment: They allow

communities to shape their futures. But when barriers are erected, the result is the same: disempowerment, inequity and lives put at risk.

Political leadership is what bridges these two worlds. In public health, we've seen how leadership can expand or restrict access. Programs like the Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program, Medicaid expansion and PEPFAR [the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief] saved lives because leaders invested in them. Conversely, stigma and silence cost lives when leaders failed to act. The same dynamic shapes democracy. Voting rights protections, investment in civic participation and the defense of democratic norms all depend on the choices made by leaders.

Freedom, in both contexts, is not abstract. It is tangible. It is the freedom to know your HIV status, to choose treatment that lets you thrive, to love openly without stigma. It is the freedom to cast a ballot, to have a say in the laws that govern your life and to live in a society where your voice matters. In both cases, freedom is realized only when individuals are empowered with knowledge, access and choice.

The lesson of HIV is clear: Choice saves lives. The lesson of democracy is just as urgent: Choice sustains freedom. When we invest in public health and defend democracy, we are making the same fundamental commitment—to trust people, to empower them and to let them decide their own futures.

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