Promising Crossroads: Choosing Our Future

August 15, 2016 By Kelsey Louie

I have said many times that we are at a promising crossroads in terms of ending the epidemic, but in order to achieve that promise, we must have the courage to act now. We are less than eight

weeks away from one of the most critical presidential elections in our history. On November 8th, our country will choose our next leader. Some may vote for a person. But many will vote for what that person represents. Does he or she represent prejudice and discrimination, or equality and inclusion? The decision each of you makes will impact us all.

As the world's first and leading HIV and AIDS service organization, Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) realizes the impact of being silent, which is why we have been fighting to have HIV and AIDS be a part of the conversation in this election cycle. We were proud to put out the first presidential candidate survey right before the Iowa caucus, but disappointed that only three of the 18 candidates running at the time decided to answer our survey. Even though there are 1.2 million people living with HIV in America, not one of the major news networks inserted a question to the candidates about a disease that has killed over 650,000 people in this country alone. When people ask me if I think we will end the epidemic and find a cure, I always tell them, "yes, if we can overcome our greatest challenge of no real substantive conversations from our leaders."

HIV and AIDS is not just an issue of health care. Mental health, substance abuse, the Affordable Care Act, gender-based violence, harm reduction strategies, were a few of the topics GMHC asked the 18 candidates. All of these topics intertwine, and are drivers of the epidemic. We cannot have leaders who fight to pass discriminatory bathroom laws, which disproportionately impact those at risk for HIV and AIDS. We need to elect leaders who understand the correlation between mental health and how passing common sense gun control will help prevent hate crimes and violence against the LGBT community.

Because of our tenacity through the darkest hours of the epidemic, we are finally seeing the first generation of long-term survivors of HIV and AIDS, who account for over one-quarter of the people living with HIV in this country. I was proud to be a part of the coalition of HIV and AIDS activists who met with Secretary Clinton and Senator Sanders earlier this year. We collectively advocated for policies that impact both long-term survivors and, most importantly, on how we can finally end the epidemic in America.

The question to the men and women across our country who hope to be elected this November is simple: Will you be a part of finally ending the epidemic in America? You either support creating access to life-saving tools like PrEP and PEP, or you don't. You either understand that all individuals should have access to comprehensive quality care, such as nutrition counseling, job readiness training and mental health counseling, or you don't. You shouldn't be running for any office, if you are not ready to address the drivers of the HIV and AIDS epidemic.

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At GMHC's David Geffen testing center, we have achieved incredible success with immediately linking people who are diagnosed with HIV to care. The outcome of removing barriers to treatment and testing results in 90 percent of the people who test positive at our testing center being virally suppressed. This outcome creates both the optimal health outcome for the client, but also makes it nearly impossible to spread the virus. Sadly, I don't see more programs like ours being implemented across the country, in large part because elected officials are either willingly ignoring the crisis or, worse, are indifferent to the crisis.

As the 2016 election begins to come to an end, I encourage everyone to ask candidates questions about HIV and AIDS. Without raising our voices and asking these questions, no answers will be given. As we found out earlier this year, what is even worse is when you do ask the questions and the candidate ignores them altogether. However, we have learned over the past 35 years that no response is a clear response that is not lost on people who have been fighting this fight from the very beginning.

It is inhumane not to fight this battle. And we have so much to fight for. We are not satisfied with the status quo. We are not happy with social and economic injustice. GMHC is here to safeguard the defenseless, to be a vital resource, and to ensure the collective voice of our community is not just heard, but also respected.

Kelsey Louie, CEO, GMHCGMHC

Most importantly, we are here to end the epidemic. And when we do, it will be because of our determination and spirit, which has lasted 35 years. From the darkest days of the epidemic in 1981, to today, it has never wavered. We have only become stronger. And we will stay strong until we find a cure.

Read the full survey at gmhc.org/survey2016.

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