Proud Ally

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Marlene McNeese traces her career in public health back to 1992, when, at age 21, she helped educate and test young women of color for HIV as a street outreach worker in Houston.

“I was really struck by the level of compassion and resilience I found in the HIV community,” recalls McNeese, who is cochair of the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS (PACHA).

Now 50 years old, McNeese, who is HIV negative, has supported and advocated for some of the most vulnerable populations in Texas. Over 12 years, she worked variously with women, people with substance use disorders and formerly incarcerated people.

Then, in 2004, she joined the Houston Health Department, where she served as chief of the Bureau of HIV/STD and Viral Hepatitis Prevention for 13 years.

She proudly recalls the department’s Hip Hop for HIV program (aka Hip Hop 4 HIV), which gave away free concert tickets as an incentive to young people who got tested for HIV.

“We did that intervention for 10 years,” McNeese says. “As a result, we were able to test over 63,000 youth and young adults.”

In 2018, McNeese was promoted to assistant director of disease prevention and control. In her current role, she oversees intergovernmental affairs as well as community and childhood environmental health.

She reviews programs and policies that the health department is considering supporting. “This can sometimes mean educating and recommending local and state policies that advance the science of public health,” she explains. And when it comes to developing HIV programs, that can sometimes mean fighting to reverse policies already in place.

Since August, McNeese has served as a member and cochair of PACHA. For nearly 27 years, PACHA has made recommendations on HIV policies, programming and research to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the White House.

“One of the bigger focus areas for PACHA is understanding that ending the epidemic is broader

than a public health intervention," McNeese says, emphasizing that it will require a whole government approach.

To that end, PACHA is hard at work establishing new intergovernmental partnerships.

The group is also dedicated to learning more about molecular HIV surveillance, which examines data collected from people during routine HIV testing to pinpoint HIV clusters and respond to outbreaks.

"We want to better understand the science as well as the experiences and implementation," McNeese explains. PACHA hopes to encourage HHS to safeguard the use of these data to ensure the protection of individual rights.

McNeese believes that although people living with HIV should be leading conversations about ending the epidemic, they shouldn't have to do all the work alone.

"As an ally, it is my responsibility to show up and be accountable and bold in what I think is effective and will support this community," McNeese says. "I should be lending all of my gifts and talents to help see a better quality of life for all of them."

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