



The Right Call

In a blog post titled “Five Takeaways From the 2022 U.S. Conference on HIV/AIDS,” POZ contributing writer Mark S. King shares his observations. Below is an edited excerpt.

January 9, 2023 By [Mark S. King](#)

After NMAC scrapped the in-person U.S. Conference on HIV/AIDS (USCHA) for two years due to COVID-19 and then two hurricanes threatened the organization’s efforts to locate its flagship event in San Juan, Puerto Rico, it would seem NMAC made it happen this year through sheer force of will.

Thank goodness. It was the right call. There’s so much to share about USCHA, but let’s break it down. Here are my five takeaways from USCHA 2022.

San Juan Was the Star of the Show

It was gorgeous. I scoured the countryside as my plane was landing and saw no evidence of the hurricane destruction so apparent on the news channels. True, these weather catastrophes follow the path of least resistance, meaning that the poorer and less developed areas of Puerto Rico, hidden from the view of tourists, were hardest hit.

There were folks who took exception to USCHA moving forward. True, those who did attend were self-selected, but there wasn’t a negative word from a single person at USCHA about being there. Quite the contrary.

Reunited and It Felt So Good

We all knew how badly we needed this. After three years of Zoom calls and canceled events and boosters and illness and losses, we are more acutely aware of the power of touch—a hug, a smile, live and in person.

We know the value of these conferences, and they are typically about the connections you develop or reinforce in the lobby and in the hallways. This has never been truer than at USCHA 2022. It was worth the trip.

It Is Time to Overhaul the Plenaries

The most enlightening aspect of the plenaries was the music of Puerto Rico and the locals speaking so emotionally about its importance to their culture and sense of belonging. But there is something wrong when your educational content is less informative than dancers on stilts.

I'll hold my fire on the AIDS 101 level of information delivered at the plenaries (a history of HIV? really?) because there were many attendees at their first USCHA and education is an ongoing process. But I sure did pine for more sophistication in the presentations. A blend would be nice.

Let's Ditch Our Silo Mentality

TikTok personality Brian Thomas, a white gay nurse living with HIV, looked forlorn when he emerged from a workshop on the experiences of Black trans-masculine people in the HIV arena. "I was one of two people there who wasn't Black or trans," he said. "How can we learn from each other, especially when we are given this perfect opportunity, if we limit ourselves to workshops that reflect our identity, and we don't go to a workshop like that one?"

Brian perfectly stated both a problem and a solution. We naturally gravitate toward workshops that cater to our own experience and often learn very little in the process. Peeking into workshops during USCHA, I saw examples of Brian's point: long-term survivors attending workshops by other long-term survivors, Black-led workshops with nearly all Black attendees, that kind of thing. We have got to get better at mixing it up.

The Future Is Female—and Black

My very unscientific observation is that half of the USCHA attendees were Black women. Or it felt that way. And thank God for that.

Black and trans women aren't merely a key demographic among people living with HIV. They are activists and public health workers. They are organizational leaders and workshop presenters. And they give the best hugs.

I shared some feedback here, including what multiple attendees praised or groused to me about privately. But make no mistake about it: I'll be back as long as I am involved in HIV. It's just too important and too inspirational, for reasons planned and unplanned.

I just can't quit you, USCHA. I would never.