Save the Black AIDS Institute: We the People Must Speak Up

A statement from the founder and former president and CEO of BAI.

August 31, 2021 By Phill Wilson

This has been a difficult time for me, as I know it has for many people affiliated with the Black AIDS Institute (BAI). This is a letter I never imagined I would ever write. I've not been able to sleep or eat. I am having trouble breathing as I write this. This is hard.

Thirty-two years ago, Reggie Williams and I had an idea. We believed that low HIV/AIDS science literacy in Black communities was an overwhelming barrier to addressing the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Black communities. We wanted to find a way to increase the engagement of Black communities in HIV/AIDS and take ownership of the pandemic in our communities. It took 10 years (Reggie died during that time), but 22 years ago, we founded the Black AIDS Institute with a mission to end the AIDS pandemic in Black communities by engaging and mobilizing institutions, leaders, and individuals in efforts to confront HIV/AIDS from a uniquely and unapologetically Black point of view.

Our motto spoke to our mission, "Our People, Our Problem, Our Solutions!" Over the years we developed training programs, published policy papers and annual "State of AIDS in Black America" reports, conducted research, launched national networks, provided technical assistance to health departments, and mobilized traditional Black Institutions and local community activists around the country, all with a fundamental belief that Black communities must lead the efforts to end the AIDS pandemic in Black communities.

Phill WilsonCourtesy of The Black AIDS Institute

At the end of 2018, after 20 years at the helm, I left my position as BAI's first President and CEO; I believed that the times we are in and the pandemic(s) we are facing require and demand a new leadership that only a new generation can provide. My belief was validated over the past two and a half years as I watched the organization that was born in my dining room, and initially funded by my life insurance policies and refinancing my house, blossom into an institution with an enhanced presence, more precise vision, and greater financial strength than I could have ever imagined. I could not be more proud of the work of BAI's staff, BTAN chapters, and partners.

Tragically, it has become inescapably apparent to me that BAI has thrived despite its board, not because of it. The current board members are disconnected from the HIV community. The cumulative effect of their failed governance, refusal to ensure that the composition of the board represents the community it serves, and unwillingness to support next-gen leadership, or address an employee's harassment complaint are all undermining BAI's evolution. I know how much it's taken to build a powerful organization and how little it takes to destabilize one.

We worked very hard on a succession plan that we thought would create a smooth transition from a founder/long-term leader to a new leader and a new direction. We made a very critical error. Effective succession planning and leadership transition is more than the transition of the President or Executive Director. It requires a succession and transition plan for the board of directors. In hindsight, I would have and should have included a robust effort to transition the board and insisted on the board focus on board development during the final years of my tenure. For that, I am deeply sorry.

As the founder of BAI, I have no confidence in the current board. I do not believe, as currently constituted, it can be trusted to lead a national organization focused on fighting HIV/AIDS in Black communities anymore. I am convinced the current board leadership will lead to the destruction of an organization that so many of us have built and fought for over the last 22 plus years.

As a Black man living with AIDS, the straw that broke the camel's back was the purging of the last two people living with HIV/AIDS, and the last community representative, from the board. I cannot support, and I cannot understand how anyone in the HIV community, can support a board of directors that purges 100% of the people living with HIV/AIDS from its membership. When it came time to support the voices of people living with HIV/AIDS on its board, this board kicked them off the board.

In addition to no PLWH's on the board, BAI has no young people on the board, no trans people on the board, and no open lesbians. It has only one Black gay man on the board. Straight white men outnumber Black gay men by two to one. The recent purge also eliminated two people representing the South where the epidemic is centered in the United States. There are no members of the board from Los Angeles where the organization is headquartered and provides direct HIV services.

The future of BAI, its work, and its dedicated staff are in danger, unless the community steps up now. We cannot afford to lose another Black organization. That is why I support the recent call by some BAI former board members for a complete reconstitution of the BAI board of directors. I also support the Change.org petition currently being launched by former BAI board members and other community activists. I urge you to do so as well. Please see below.

What needs to happen: BAI Board Reconstitution - the entire BAI board of directors needs to resign.

1. The Board Chair and the 2nd Vice-Chair must resign immediately!
2. The remaining four board members in partnership with BTAN and AAHU members must

immediately begin a transparent, community-driven process to reconstitute a new board. Both the interim both and the final new board must include representation from the following groups:

a. Black people openly living with HIV/AIDS

b. Black people currently on PrEP

c. Black gay men, trans women, and cis women

d. Current or former BTAN members and AAHU members

e. Representatives from CBOs or ASOs.

3. The new Executive Committee must have at least one PLWH and two other members from the above group.

4. By December 1, 2021, the remaining four current board members must resign from the board. No one currently serving on the board can be on the new reconstituted board.

5. PLWHs, representatives from Black Treatment Advocates Network (BTAN) chapters, the African American HIV University (AAHU) Alumni, and BAI staff must be involved in any and all decisions regarding the future of the President and CEO position.

Call to Action: By HIV Community Members/Workforce

1. Please sign this Change.org petition created by Gina Brown, David Munar, Marlene McNeese, and Vanessa Williams, Maxx Boykin, Leisha McKinley Beach, Trina Scott, Dázon Dixon Diallo, Venita Ray and others. You can sign it as an individual member of the HIV community and also ask your organizational representative to sign. Petition link: https://www.change.org/SaveBlackAIDSInstitute

2. By September 3, 2021, please email the BAI Board Chair, Grazell Howard at thelibragp@aol.com and BAIBoardPetition@gmail.com to call for the BAI Board to be reconstituted to represent the Black HIV community and its workforce.

We The People must speak up, save BAI, and end the HIV epidemic among our people.

Signed by:

- Gina Brown, PLWA, HIV Activist, Former Board Member
- Leisha McKinley Beach, Former BAI Staff
- Maxx Boykin, Former BAI Staff, BTAN Member
- Dázon Dixon Diallo
- Marlene McNeese, Former Board Member
- Leo Moore, Physician, Advocate
- David Ernesto Munar, PLWA, Former Board Member
- Venita Ray

- Trina Scott, AAHU alumni
- Vanessa Williams, Former Board Member

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