



A Southern HIV Icon Announces Retirement

AIDS Alabama CEO Kathie Hiers has spent 30 years reshaping national HIV policy and fighting for people living with HIV in the South.

February 16, 2026 By [Mark S. King](#)

On December 2, Kathie Hiers, the longtime CEO OF AIDS Alabama, announced her retirement. POZ contributor Mark S. King spoke with Hiers about her work, her legacy and what's next for the community and for herself.

Recent government actions have crippled so much of our work. It's been tough on everyone. How are you?

Today, I'm sitting in my office, and I am about to tell the staff about my retirement. I've got the door shut. My board already knows. It's hard to tell people. I'm a big crybaby.

How will that go, telling your staff, do you think?

This is hard after doing this for 30-plus years. This work is a calling for me. In the early days, I lost so many friends. I threw an address book away because I couldn't stand to look at it anymore. I'm scared we're going back to those times with all that's going on now. My retirement date is June 1, and I will stay around for another six months to help with projects.

When did your HIV work begin?

In 1993, I walked into the local organization in Mobile, Alabama, and got hired. Before that, I had started a nonprofit organization to help people with AIDS with their Christmas wish lists or visit people alone in the hospital. We helped people die with a little dignity, since there was nothing else you could do then. By 1998, I was on the board of AIDS Alabama, and in 2002, I became their director.

Kathie Hiers and the staff of AIDS Alabama in 2025

Courtesy of Kathie Hiers

You've become an iconic national HIV leader—and from Alabama of all places. How?

I was driven by what I felt was an inequity. People living with HIV in the South were being wronged. When I began to understand the national landscape, it became very clear to me that the South was being royally screwed. We had the fastest-growing HIV population, the most people dying and over 1,000 people on waiting lists for medications. Nobody wanted to talk about the fact these were minority people. That fired me up. So I got together with some other Southern AIDS directors, and we started the Southern AIDS Coalition. We put on a full-fledged campaign, writing op-eds, going to every conference, showing the disparities between urban and rural areas. It did not make me popular, though.

I was at the United States Conference on HIV/AIDS one year, talking about this in a meeting, and someone from New York started screaming that I was a liar and that I was trying to steal money from big cities.

You were able to change the way HIV funding goes to the South?

Yes. By 2006, we managed to get more money from the Ryan White CARE Act, and then we started working to get the HOPWA [Housing Opportunities for People with AIDS] laws changed, which we did by 2016. That helped a lot.

What are your thoughts about retirement? You're about to walk through a door you've been looking at for a long time.

It's such an unknown for me. When you've done something your entire adult life, you can't imagine a life without it. It's a little sad, but I know I can't do this forever and need to quit while I'm in decent shape.

What's a defining memory of your work?

When we finally persuaded President George W. Bush to put money in ADAP [the AIDS Drug Assistance Program], and the waiting list we had in Alabama disappeared. I'll never forget when the Ryan White law got changed in 2006 to give more money to the South. I was watching C-SPAN when they started debating and passed it, and I was all by myself screaming in joy at the television. It was the culmination of years of advocacy and hard work.

You saved lives that day.

Yeah. It was a group effort, but yeah. Definitely.

Activism makes strange bedfellows. I hear you once found common ground with former Trump Attorney General and Alabama Senator Jeff Sessions. How in the world did that happen?

I'm a big believer that you go into the offices of people who don't agree with you. I had never gotten much traction with Senator Jeff Sessions. He would meet with me—I'll give him that. But I found out his pet peeve was Alabama getting cheated on federal dollars. So I explained to him how Alabama was losing these HIV funds, and he was all about it, then. He got other senators involved, and they fought on the Senate floor for us. He became a huge ally.

Hiers and advocates from Alabama at AIDSWatch in 2023
Courtesy of Kathie Hiers

There has been a rash of prominent HIV leader retirements recently—Paul Kawata of NMAC, Jesse Milan of AIDS United and now you. What’s going on?

We’re getting old! I’m 71 now. I’ll be 72 when my role here ends. That’s just the laws of nature. But all the retirements worry me. Those are the people who lived through the dark days. I often have young people come to work for me who know nothing about the history of the epidemic.

How vital is new leadership to our movement and balancing that with people who understand organizational and pandemic history?

I’m not saying those young people can’t turn into dynamic leaders, but we need to make sure they

understand our history, especially today when we are facing the same challenges we faced in the early days.

Is that your message to younger folks joining this movement?

Yes. Look at the history of the epidemic and understand the dangers of where we are now. I can't think of any other disease that has made as much progress in such a short time. In 40 years, we've moved from a death sentence to a normal life expectancy. This has happened quickly but not evenly. We still have key populations and geographic areas that aren't doing as well.

What's next for you?

I definitely want to take a little time off, do something fun. I'm also moving back to my hometown of Mobile.

Do you have a bucket list?

I love to travel. I've never been to Asia. That's something I'll be doing.

I'm a romantic, so I hope there will be a loving partner at your side in the future to enjoy retirement with.

That's on my bucket list too. It hasn't happened, but I'm open to it. I get to do a lot of cool things. It would be fun to share it with someone.

Consider this interview your Hinge profile.

What's Hinge?

It's like Tinder.

Oh, like the boys have Grindr? There should be one for the girls called Shrub.

I love it. That's your new project. Launch that.

Got it.

Thank you for your service to so many people, Kathie.

You're welcome, but I'm not going anywhere.

Visit aidsalabama.org to learn more about the group's work, watch a video on Kathie Hiers's retirement or make a contribution in her honor.

