Southern Star

AIDS Alabama provides HIV/AIDS services across the state and advocacy throughout the entire South.

February 10, 2014 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

Kathie Hiers became CEO of AIDS Alabama in 2002 and president of the National AIDS Housing Coalition in 2010. She's also a member of the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS (PACHA), co-chair of the Federal AIDS Policy Partnership (FAPP) and a member of the public policy committee of AIDS United. Previously, Hiers was executive director of Mobile AIDS Support Services.

In 2012, she was one of the central figures in the HIV/AIDS documentary deepsouth by journalist and filmmaker Lisa Biagiotti. As a result of that movie, Hiers says, she has gotten more attention, at least from her colleagues, for the fight against HIV/AIDS in the South.

Hiers shares her upcoming advocacy efforts, including as a member of the planning committee for the White House HIV and the South Meeting, which still needs to be rescheduled. She also talks about how she got involved in HIV/AIDS work and what keeps her motivated to stay in the fight.

Tell us about AIDS Alabama and your advocacy efforts.
Since 1987, our mission is to help HIV-positive people in the state of Alabama live healthy and independent lives. We work to stop the transmission of HIV. First and foremost, we specialize in housing. We really believe housing is health care. For someone living with HIV, it's hard to be adherent to treatment when you don't have a safe place to live.

We started out rather small. A belly-up church in Birmingham donated a little school and church to the agency, which became our first housing programs. In the days when it was mostly gay men, we turned the buildings into 18 single unit apartments. It wasn't long after that we realized women and families were also affected, so we started more buildings. We now have 200 units of housing across the state of Alabama.

Plus, we manage HOPWA [Housing Opportunities for Persons With AIDS, a federal program] for the state, as well as the city of Birmingham. We're also an umbrella organization for the other eight AIDS service organizations [ASOs] in the state.

We were pretty good at raising money, getting contracts and being stewards of money, so we

started going after large grants. We wrote in our fellow ASOs because it shouldn't matter where you live. We've grown to 80 contracts with all the ASOs. All 67 counties in Alabama are covered. I don't know of another state that is set up with this model.

Also, AIDS Alabama is the only ASO to have received a statewide navigator grant [to help our clients sign up for health insurance under the Affordable Care Act, a.k.a. the health care reform law, or ACA]. As a result, we're seeing people come into AIDS Alabama who would have never come in otherwise. Since Alabama is one of the states unwilling to expand Medicaid, it's important for us to do this ACA work.

We believe in advocacy. We have a strong core belief that HIV-positive people have to be the ones to lead the show. I can talk about this all day and all night, but I don't live with HIV. On our annual HIV/AIDS awareness day [in the state capital of Montgomery], we have at least 300 people there and 200 are HIV positive.

The politicians say, "Here come the AIDS people," but they know they're not getting away from us. Our 2014 awareness day is March 13. This year, the Latino Commission on AIDS will bolster our efforts [with help from their staff running their program called Latinos in the Deep South].

We're also having another Youth Day [in Montgomery] to promote compre-hensive sexual education and get these stupid laws off the books. One law says if you teach HIV and sex ed in the classroom, then there are nine things you have to teach.

One of those things is that homosexuality is not accepted by society and is illegal, even though it's not in Alabama. It's ludicrous, and we're trying to get that changed.

Give us an update on the White House summit on HIV and the South.
For years, the Southern AIDS Coalition and the Southern HIV/AIDS Strategy Initiative have put out research about HIV in the South.

They got the idea that the White House should do a summit in 2013 about the epidemic in the South, just as had been done for other topics, such as housing and the continuum of care [as well as for women and girls, and minority groups].

After much arm-twisting, [the for-mer Office of National AIDS Policy director] Grant Colfax agreed to it. But before the summit could happen, the federal government shut down, which postponed it. Whether the summit happens in the spring or later this year, I want the community to have a part in it.

How did you first become involved in HIV/AIDS work?
When I was a young lesbian in the 1970s and '80s in Mobile, Alabama, the gay girls and guys ran together a lot. Most of my best friends were gay guys. I'll never forget in 1985, my partner and I were sitting in a restaurant and six of our best friends walked in. They had come back from Florida from getting tested for HIV, which could be done anonymously there. All of them came back

positive.

All but one of them is dead now. I found myself in a place where everyone around me was dying. I reached a point in my life where I threw my address book away and started over. You don't lose those kinds of friends over and over again without it really changing the trajectory of your life.

I didn't even know about nonprofits then. I was working on my master's degree in English. Then this friend said he wanted to start a construction company and I thought, "Great, let's do it!" I learned all about housing and then went back to school to learn about finance and accounting.

I then was hired by a local ASO in Mobile as its chief operating officer. I had started my own nonprofit before, after a friend had died. From there, I never looked back.

I was then on the board of AIDS Alabama. When the director left, I applied for the job. I count my blessings that I have a job where I enjoy waking up every day and can help the fight.

What keeps you motivated?
It ain't over! We're better than we used to be, but half the HIV/AIDS deaths are still in the South. In the early days of the epidemic, infrastructure was needed most in urban areas to develop peer delivery systems. But when the disease became more defuse, the South became the hotbed for the epidemic.

We've struggled. We are this perfect storm for HIV. You've got poor educational systems and a lot of stigma. My friends ask me, "Why do you stay down here?" It's my home. I want to make it better. That's what gets me fired up.

What are your priorities for 2014?
Our top priority in Alabama is to get our governor to expand Medicaid [under the ACA]. Our second priority is appropriations. We're also focusing on comprehensive sex education and to get rid of the laws preventing that from happening.

What I want people to understand is that there is something called economies of scale. Look at cities like Memphis, Jackson, Baton Rouge and Birmingham.

These mid-size cities wouldn't take as much money as Miami or New York or San Francisco to do great HIV/AIDS programming. It's hard to get anybody to buy into that concept.

To really meet the overall goals of the National HIV/AIDS Strategy, we've got to figure out what to do about the epidemic in the South.

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