



Stigma Persists

In his first POZ blog post, titled “[HIV Has Changed. Stigma Hasn’t](#),” long-term survivor and former New York State Senator Tom Duane is struck by the misconception that HIV stigma is vastly diminished. Below is an edited excerpt.

August 11, 2025 By [Tom Duane](#)

AIDS and people affected by HIV have been stigmatized since the very beginning. Fear and the fact that we didn’t know very much about HIV magnified the disgrace that came with a positive diagnosis. However misguided and inhumane, the stigma was ever present.

One example, based on incorrect knowledge of known and accepted science, is that in 1991, the legendary basketball player Magic Johnson, who bravely shared his HIV status in November of that year, was thrown out of, barred from and forbidden to play on any team, any league, anywhere. This edict was decided by those in charge of the National Basketball Association (NBA): the team owners.

Johnson was invited to be in the starting lineup for the “Dream Team” in the 1992 Olympics, despite some teammates expressing worry that the virus could be transmitted should Johnson have an open wound during a game. Regardless, Johnson joined other NBA powerhouse players on the team. While suffering with a knee injury, Magic still scored an average of eight points per game in the Olympics, and the United States dominated, securing the gold medal.

Another example of extreme stigma from that time was that international travelers living with HIV were forbidden entry into our country. This ban remained in effect for 20 years. And, to this day, some countries still deny people entry based on their positive HIV status.

I am a person who is open about being HIV positive. When I was deciding to run for the New York City Council in 1991, I knew that it would be a challenge if voters knew, since the stigma was so oppressive and so widespread at the time. AIDS was thought to be a death sentence, so logically it followed that disclosing my status would be the death of my political career as well.

I decided that I wasn’t going to hide, so I disclosed that I was living with HIV to the voting public.

And I was elected.

In 1999, when I ran for and was elected to the New York state Senate, there was still a lot of stigma. I was shocked, although maybe I should not have been, by the ignorance, fear and judgment on display among many in and around the state legislature. It wasn't just that one senator did not want to shake my hand; it was that I arrived to witness ignorance by so many regarding how HIV is contracted. That lack of knowledge informed some very poorly conceived legislation and policy regarding HIV and AIDS.

Tragically, still today, with all the advances in medications and treatment, and the fact that HIV is no longer a death sentence, the stigma is as powerful as ever.

In many nameplated meetings, surrounded by well-meaning people from HIV and AIDS organizations and other related groups, I am often struck by the misconception of some of them that the stigma around the virus is vastly diminished or practically nonexistent. I tell them to ask their clients!

I would venture to say that if service providers asked their clients at these organizations, they'd find that the vast majority haven't told anyone about their HIV status, except maybe a small circle of friends.

I'm well aware that having decided to publicly disclose my HIV status back in 1991, I'm an exception. But the vast majority of people living with HIV will tell you that they haven't disclosed—not to employers, coworkers, landlords, neighbors or family. Because stigma is alive and well and, sadly, thriving.