Will We?

After turning 70 years old, AIDS United policy fellow Ronald Johnson takes a thoughtful look back in a blog post titled "As We Mark 37 Years of HIV, We Can End the Epidemic. Will We?" Below is an edited excerpt.

August 13, 2018 By Ronald Johnson

A notice appeared on June 5, 1981, in the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR), published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, that a rare form of pneumonia had been diagnosed among five "active homosexuals" in Los Angeles. Two of them had died. All had been previously healthy.

There was little immediate public reaction to the MMWR notice. The Associated Press and the Los Angeles Times filed stories about the report on June 5, and the San Francisco Chronicle ran an article on June 6. The New York Times published an article a month later on what by then were 41 cases of a rare form of cancer among gay men in New York and California.

Reading that article on the eve of July 4 as a gay man living in New York City, I thought it was strange but had no idea that our world was about to change drastically. By mid-August Larry Kramer had pulled together a group of gay men who raised the funds that led to the formation of Gay Men's Health Crisis in January 1982, the first U.S. AIDS service organization.

Along with that activist response, there was fast-growing fear among many gay men, increased stigmatization of gay men and of gay sex (including internalized stigma), stigmatization of injection drug users and of drug use in general, and increased discrimination and blindness to the impact of the emerging epidemic on women who did not have a history of drug use.

There was also much hope and optimism in those early years that a cure would be found quickly. However, the more dominant reaction among the general public and most levels of government was the willful and shameful ignorance of the nascent epidemic and the neglect of, animosity toward and abhorrence of people living with and dying of the newly recognized disease.

When I was 41 years old and diagnosed with HIV in 1989, I was convinced that I would be dead before my 50th birthday. Then, in 1996, the arrival of effective HIV treatment brought back hope and optimism. However, that revival was soon challenged by the clear inequities and gaps in access to the new drug therapies and to HIV prevention education and services.

June 5, 2018, was the 37th anniversary of the pandemic. We have two generations of people who've never known a world without AIDS, but we also have the tools to end the epidemic in the

United States and globally. I recently celebrated my 70th birthday. I’m more worried about my back than I am about having HIV. And I’m not the only long-term survivor. There are many of us.

However, there are also many people who remain vulnerable to HIV or whose HIV is undiagnosed or not successfully treated. Numerous factors account for those realities. For me, the salient factor is the continued lack of sufficient political will to end the HIV epidemic.

We have a president, an administration and a congressional majority who have made little public effort to highlight the priority of ending the HIV epidemic. Thankfully, tenacious federal leaders and workers are moving forward to maintain a strong federal response to HIV. And thankfully, the courage and determination of people living with and affected by HIV have kept hope and optimism alive.

We enter the 38th year of AIDS and HIV still counting. We can end the epidemic, but will we? If the political landscape does not support our efforts, then we must elect leaders with the political will. The 2019 anniversary can be a marker on the countdown to ending the HIV epidemic. Yes, we can. More importantly, we must.

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