A Year Later

In a blog post titled "A Year of President Trump," HIV Caucus chair Andrew Spieldenner, PhD, examines the increasing need for people living with HIV to build community in our current political climate. Here is an edited excerpt.

April 2, 2018 By Andrew Spieldenner

It's been over a year of President Trump, and for those of us who are "other"—whether we identify as people of color, women, LGBTQ, immigrant or concerned with the environment—it's been rough. Our concerns have been trampled on, our experiences dismissed, our rights rolled back. The onslaught has been deliberate, intense and ongoing.

The U.S. People Living with HIV Caucus (the HIV Caucus) recognizes the damage from the harmful rhetoric, institutional neglect and discrimination-based violence. This statement is an acknowledgement of what we have been through and where we can go.

While the United States has never been truly safe for those of us whose differences are marked by color, sexuality, gender identity and expression, religion, socioeconomic class, disability and age, it has become more hostile under this administration.

The death toll from Hurricane Maria remains undetermined, and many acts of violence are committed on the basis of race and gender. At the same time, President Trump praises white supremacists on social media, dismisses sexual harassment allegations and tries to ban immigrants and trans people from our nation's tapestry.

There are lessons we've learned and actions we've taken. HIV activists have never accepted what we've been given or how we are legislated. In the past year, we've protested publicly, loudly and consistently.

Whether Trump is proposing immigration bans or sabotaging the Affordable Care Act (ACA), we continue to resist alongside our allies and against this administration and its hatred. We refuse to accept that our needs are not as important as the corporations that billionaires run.

HIV Caucus vice chair Barb Cardell explains, "My commitment to street activism and protest was reignited, partly because this administration has been so horrific in denying the rights of the LGBT community, people of color and people living with HIV (especially around health care). I hounded my state legislator on his complicity in trying to repeal the ACA."

Not everyone can protest safely. For many of us, the threats to our personal and professional safety require us to avoid engaging the legal system. But it’s important for us to find community; isolation can be dispiriting.

Tiommi Luckett, secretary of the HIV Caucus, states, “Demonstrations and rallies can be effective, but as a Black trans woman living with HIV, I’d rather organize and mobilize people from behind the scenes because my identities meet at the intersection of being criminalized for exercising my First Amendment privilege.”

We witnessed amazing election results in 2017. From New Jersey to Virginia and beyond, voters made sure that their voices were heard loud and clear. In Milford, Pennsylvania, Sean Strub—founder of POZ magazine and one of the founders of the HIV Caucus—won a bid for mayor.

“I’m so proud of Sean Strub and the work he is doing in the small town of Milford,” attests Tami Haught, member of the HIV Caucus leadership team. “It’s vital that people living with HIV take part in the legislative process.”

AIDSWatch is the largest national legislative HIV event in the United States; in 2018, we convened in Washington, DC, on March 26 and 27. A partnership between the HIV Caucus, AIDS United and Treatment Access Expansion Project, AIDSWatch brings together people living with HIV and our allies to meet with legislators and make our case about our needs. It also connects us with one another.

In 2017, we saw a record number of participants. In 2018, we must come together in even larger numbers to “RESIST!” The only way to battle these onslaughts is through community.

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