4 Battles the HIV Community Must Fight in 2018

We won some and lost some in 2017. As our challenges intensify, here's one way to stay vigilant and engaged.

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2017 was a year in which HIV advocates achieved more than many thought possible given the dire political circumstances, but it was also a year in which many people suffered needlessly from the proliferation of unjust policies from Washington, DC. People living with and affected by HIV locked arms in solidarity with the oppressed and vulnerable people of this nation, letting the people in power know that the repeal of the Affordable Care Act, creation of grossly unjust tax policies, and institutionalized discrimination against people of color, religious minorities, and the LGBT community would not stand. We won some of these battles, like the votes on repeal of the Affordable Care Act (ACA, or Obamacare), and we lost others such as the fight to stop Congressional Republicans from passing a $1.5 trillion tax cut for the wealthy.

Less than a week into the new year, it is clear that the same vigilance and energy we put into fighting for health and basic human rights of people living with or affected by HIV will be needed again in 2018. With the Congressional midterm elections coming up in November we must dig deep and rededicate ourselves to our advocacy work to ensure that the next Congress will genuinely help us work toward ending the HIV epidemic in America.

However, with midterm elections still 10 months away, many other issues require our attention and advocacy. Here is a sampling of what to expect in 2018:

- Congressional Republican leadership sets their sights on Medicaid: Even before they passed their mammoth tax cut in December, GOP leaders were setting the stage to push for cuts to safety net programs like Medicaid and Medicare to pay for them. House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-WI) has made his intentions clear, saying in an interview last month that "entitlement reform," i.e. the gutting of health care for low-income and elderly Americans, would be a priority.

- ACA repeal efforts are not over: Unfortunately, Senator John McCain's (R-AZ) dramatic thumbs-

down vote on the floor of the Senate last year was not the last word in the GOP's attempts to overturn the ACA. The tax plan passed last month included repeal of the ACA's individual mandate, which could lead to 13 million people losing their health insurance, and Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC) is already working to resurrect the failed repeal legislation he worked on last year with Senator Bill Cassidy (R-LA). Add to that the Trump administration's continued efforts to undermine the ACA—like rules proposed on Thursday to allow small businesses to buy "association health plans" that would bypass some ACA protections—and the attacks on our nation's health care law are far from over.

- Puerto Rico & The U.S. Virgin Islands will need our aid: It has been more than 100 days since Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands and life there is still nowhere near normal. Nearly half of Puerto Rican households are still without electricity, the territory's unjustly apportioned Medicaid program is on the verge of bankruptcy and hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans have already left the island for the mainland. In 2018, our friends and fellow citizens in Puerto Rico will need the power of our voices more than ever.

- Voting rights will continue to be under attack: Despite the sudden dissolution of the Trump administration's sham "Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity" this week, the threat to voting rights in America for people of color will not be going anywhere anytime soon. Despite the victory of Doug Jones in Alabama being propelled by the votes of black Alabamians (black women in particular), the election was rife with instances of systemic voter suppression. Despite these barriers, AIDS United and other organizations will be working to create resource kits for HIV and community based organizations to help people living with and affected by HIV get out the vote.

It is clear that people living with HIV and their allies will need to stay vigilant and engaged in 2018. One way to do so is to attend AIDSWatch, the nation's largest annual constituent-based national HIV/AIDS advocacy event. Combined, our voices, stories, and passion will get us closer to ending the epidemic. You can register here.

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