AIDSWatch 2020 Was a Success

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This guest post is by Jesse Milan Jr., JD, president and CEO of AIDS United.

As I reflect on the 27th annual AIDSWatch, I have never been prouder to be a member of this community of HIV advocates than right now as we unite to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic.

When the crisis began in earnest in the United States, the AIDSWatch planning partners responded swiftly. We knew that a virtual AIDSWatch would allow us to learn and grow together while not putting any of us — especially all of us living with HIV — at risk or in harm's way.

While not meeting in person meant we missed the kinds of fellowship that come with being in person, this was the largest AIDSWatch ever. Going virtual meant hundreds more were able to attend. Through all the channels, more than 2,500 people attended all or part of AIDSWatch. And, now the videos of the sessions are on YouTube, where even more people will get to watch them.

We began the day with an update on the federal response to the COVID-19 pandemic and what people living with HIV need to know about the virus from Dr. Jonathan Mermin, director of the National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD and TB Prevention at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

He told us:

People with HIV understand stigma and discrimination. People with HIV understand the results of inaction. People with HIV also understand what happens when we are all included, what it means to be embraced … and we know what happens when we have when we act thoughtfully and positively, leading with

science, love and support.

Harold Phillips, chief operating officer of Ending the HIV Epidemic, shared an update on the initiative's implementation and impact with us. He stressed that, despite the understandably massive COVID-19 response, a community-driven response to ending the HIV epidemic in the United States remains as high a priority as ever.

Advocacy workshops included education and strategizing around specific issue areas that are part of the community road map to end the HIV epidemic that AIDS United released on World AIDS Day 2018 and has been endorsed by 250 organizations. These included U=U (a campaign to spread awareness that undetectable equals untransmittable, which means a person with an undetectable viral load cannot transmit HIV), HIV and aging, fighting stigma and syringe access.

There were also several sessions dedicated to the specific needs of populations that are disproportionately impacted by HIV. These include transgender people, sex workers, people who use drugs, Black communities in the South and Latinx people.

Through connecting at events like AIDSWatch over the last 40 years, we have become experts on how to address a virus. We are experts on how to translate science into social change. And we are experts on how to advocate for the public health resources that we need. We know that our stories have immense power to drive real, lasting and structural change for those of us living with HIV.

As we've done this work, we have been intentional about connecting across regions, cities and states, rural and urban areas. We've connected across generations, across races and ethnicities, across genders and identities. We've even been intentional about connecting across political parties and personal faiths.

These connections are political power.

Over the course of the coming weeks and months, we will carry the power we gained at AIDSWatch forward.

We know that the work has only just begun.

We remain in this fight — together.

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