We’re Coming Back!

Opportunities and challenges at the 2022 Biomedical HIV Prevention Summit.

April 5, 2022 By Paul Kawata

Like so many organizations, NMAC has worked remotely over the last two years. Recently, we held our first in-person all staff retreat. It was a trial run for the in-person opportunities and challenges at the 2022 Biomedical HIV Prevention Summit. Honestly, I was a little nervous. It’s been 24 months of seeing everyone only in those little zoom boxes. How would it be to come together? Would we find our groove or has the work paradigm completely transformed?

I’m sharing because, in three weeks, we are gathering in Chicago for the 2022 Summit. For many of us, this will be our first big gathering. It is hard to know what to expect and initially the meeting might be very socially awkward. With the BA2 variant, there are real concerns. As we learned during the early days of safer sex education, there are no guarantees. Condoms offered a high level of protection, but they are not fool proof. Please use good judgement. If you are not feeling well, stay home or in your hotel room.

Here’s the thing about the in-person all staff meeting: after some initial awkwardness, it was great to see everyone. We easily fell back into our groove and realized how much we missed each other. At the same time, we learned how COVID has changed the nature of how we work. NMAC has the privilege of working remotely and I don’t think we will be going back regularly into an office. Being together was valuable and I missed the unscheduled interactions with staff, but the commute is hell. If anything, we are more productive working from home.

Here are some of the guidelines to help make the Summit safer for everyone:

1. Everyone must register and show proof of vaccination in advance of attending the meeting. Due to the need to confirm vaccination for each registrant, there will be no onsite registration. Registration will close and vaccine confirmation must be done by Friday, April 8. Vaccine confirmation must be done on this website. If we do not receive vaccine credentials, registrants will not be allowed entry,
2. Masks are encouraged but not required. The Summit will follow the City of Chicago’s COVID requirements. Nobody should be “shamed” if they choose to wear a mask.
3. Rapid tests are available for free onsite. If you are not feeling well, please stay home or in your hotel room. Contract the conference office for the test.
4. Hugs OK, Elbow, or Do Not Touch indications will be written on the bottom of name tags. Please honor attendees’ boundaries and understand we are all in difference places,
5. NMAC has a COVID protocol should anyone get sick. Contact the conference office for support. Our policy requires anyone who tests positive for COVID to isolate until they get a negative test.
6. NMAC will support additional hotel nights for scholarship recipients who test positive for COVID.

Other attendees will be required to cover their own costs.

We will be 1,000 strong in Chicago. There are critical issues and organizing needed to move our work. COVID has been a real setback and there are many unknowns about the current state of the epidemic. Has COVID isolation resulted in more or less HIV? Looking at the STD numbers is very concerning. Getting ready for Chicago might create some anxiety. That should be expected. It’s been a long time since we’ve been together. After two years of zoom calls, I’m not sure how to act around real people whom I can hug. Like most things in our work, we will get through this together.

Yours in the Struggle,

Paul Kawata

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