# What Critical Issues Will AIDSWatch Tackle in 2017?

Advocate Ronald Johnson explains the power our collective voice will have at this month's event in DC.

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Ronald Johnson, vice president of policy and advocacy at AIDS United, is a lifetime HIV advocate. Currently, he is gearing up for AIDSWatch, the nation's largest annual constituent-based national HIV/AIDS advocacy event (details about registration are at the bottom of this interview). Sarah Hashmall, AIDS United's communications manager, spoke with Ronald to learn more about his motivations, experience as an advocate, and what to expect at AIDSWatch this year.

What motivated you to become an HIV advocate?

What motivated me originally was being a Black gay man in the early '80s when that "strange disease" first surfaced. I wanted to know more about it and get more involved, which led me to become a volunteer at GMHC, the first community-based organization dealing with HIV in New York City. That started the very long journey of being involved in HIV, including being an advocate.

When did you start attending AIDSWatch?

In the late '90s when I joined the staff of GMHC, I began to participate in AIDSWatch. At that point in time, AIDSWatch was exclusively focused on appropriations - it was about HIV funding. Having an opportunity to go to Congress at a time when there was still little hope and a lot of death – this was even before antiretroviral treatments – was very meaningful. It was challenging, but joining people from all over the country to walk the halls of Congress was very exciting.

It was still a time in the country – as well as on Capitol Hill – where there was a lot of ignorance about HIV. A lot of Members of Congress didn't think that HIV was an issue in their districts. So, educating them about the epidemic and overcoming the stigma attached to HIV was critical. Stigma and discrimination are still an issue today, but even in the late '90s it was a bigger barrier to overcome.

Among the advocates at AIDSWatch, there was a feeling of movement, commitment, and determination. The response to HIV has always been driven by advocacy and activism. The public health principals and urgency alone didn't do the trick. We needed to have people active in making the points and advocating for HIV.

Thinking about HIV advocacy today, what lessons can we pull from the early years of the epidemic?

The first and foremost lesson is that we've been here before. We've experienced opposition – and even hostility – before, and we know how to respond to that.

Going into this AIDSWatch, our numbers and visibility make a difference. The loudness of our collective voice makes a difference, and that's what we need to demonstrate. It is so important this year in particular, where there is a clear indication that the current administration is not going to be as forceful in addressing HIV as the previous administration.

Also, the intersectionality of issues is very important. HIV is a women's health issue, an issue of poverty, an issue of homophobia, transphobia, and racism. It is an issue of justice in terms of HIV criminalization. AIDSWatch enables us to make those connections.

What are the critical issues we are tackling at this year's AIDSWatch?

There are so many! Certainly in line with the tradition and history of AIDSWatch, funding for HIV programs is still paramount. The movement to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act (ACA, or Obamacare) is an important issue. The ACA has made a tremendous difference in expanding access to coverage and health care for people living with HIV. The ACA is a firm foundation, we need to improve it, strengthen it, and build from it. We certainly do not need to repeal and replace it with something that is virtually nonexistent at this point or a plan that will be grossly inadequate to meet the health needs of people living with HIV and other chronic diseases.

Also, there are clear plans from the White House and Congress to block grant Medicaid. This would be a serious blow to the health care of people living with HIV, particularly low-income people. Medicaid accounts for 40% of health coverage for people living with HIV. We cannot see Medicaid destroyed, and I feel that block granting Medicaid would destroy Medicaid as a safety net for low-income people.

Learn about other issues we'll be advocating for here!

Why is it important that people attend AIDSWatch this year?

Now is definitely the time. We have the ability to end the epidemic. We have the science and we have the effective programs. We cannot afford to have a federal government that leads us away from that. We need to maintain the national HIV/AIDS strategy and the federal government's commitment to that strategy.

These are issues that do affect all of us, whether one is living with HIV or not. HIV affects our communities and health of our country. It is something that everyone needs to be aware of and to the degree to which they are able, be involved and present in Washington. We need to show our strength. AIDSWatch is an excellent vehicle to show our determination to not be steered away from ending the epidemic.

How do you stay motivated as an HIV advocate?

Being HIV-positive, this is personal as well as a professional commitment. This is my life as well as the lives of my friends and fellow citizens, and that continues to motivate me.

Also, the fact that we can end this epidemic – there is hope. In the late ’80, there was so little hope and so many people died and were dying quickly. Seeing that turn around keeps me motivated. Yes, we are in a dangerous position policy-wise, in terms of where Congress and the administration seem to be heading. But I know from experience that we can turn death around, and can turn this dismal phase around. We can do it the same way we did before, through activism, determination, showing up, and by making our voices heard.

Thank you, Ronald! It was such a pleasure talking with you and we can’t wait to see you at AIDSWatch!

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## Want to join Ronald and other HIV advocates like him at AIDSWatch? Register today!

AIDSWatch, presented by The Elizabeth Taylor AIDS Foundation, is the nation’s largest annual constituent-based national HIV/AIDS advocacy event, bringing together hundreds of people living with HIV and their allies to meet with Members of Congress and to educate them about the important issues at stake for people living with HIV/AIDS in the United States. AIDSWatch 2017 will take place March 27 - March 28, 2017 in Washington D.C. Learn more and register today!

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