Ending the Epidemic: Look to the Beginning, Prepare for the End

January 24, 2012 By Paul Kawata

A young reporter recently asked me “what was like in the olden days, before Protease Inhibitors and combination therapy?” I always find it difficult to truly express what happened. Sometimes I feel like a soldier who fought in some horrible war and I wonder if I will ever be able to recover from my experiences.

Many folks who fought and survived the early days of the epidemic will understand. We can’t quite verbalize what that time was like, yet the epidemic continues to define our life and our relationships. Thirty years later our struggle continues. But now there is light at the end of the tunnel - maybe we can end the epidemic! Maybe we will live to see the end of this tragedy.

2012 marks the National Minority AIDS Council’s (NMAC) 25th Anniversary. In the midst of an epidemic, it never seems appropriate to celebrate; however, with the very real possibility that we could finally end this epidemic, it seems more than fitting that we take a moment to honor our past as we plan for our challenging but promising future.

NMAC was founded in the trailer park of the Circus Circus Hotel in Las Vegas. How glamorous! It was 1986 and we were in Vegas for the American Public Health Association’s (APHA) annual meeting. That year they scheduled their first plenary on the epidemic. It took them 5 years to elevate HIV to a plenary session. The keynote was Dr. Merv Silverman, then the commissioner for health for the city of San Francisco. While Merv was a friend to many of us; we were troubled by the fact that the plenary did not include one person of color. As a result, we decided to storm the stage and take the microphone from him. This was 1986, a year before Act-Up was founded.

I will always remember Craig Harris grabbing the microphone out of Merv’s hand while shouting “I will be heard!” I’ll bet your organization has a similar story. Our movement was founded on dissent and protests. Craig died a few years later... I still miss him.

We’re bringing the United States Conference on AIDS back to where it all started for NMAC. Please join us from September 30th through October 3rd, 2012 (http://www.2012usca.org) in Las Vegas. It seems only fitting that as we work to realize our new mission of developing leadership to END the HIV/AIDS epidemic, we revisit our past and reflect on the reasons why an organization like NMAC was needed in the first place. While our movement is changing, , the impetus behind our organization - the disproportionate impact HIV/AIDS has had on communities of color - persists.

And we will not rest until the epidemic and these underlying disparities are a thing of the past! We will take every opportunity to celebrate the lives and sacrifices that created our movement and we will also kick off our first Summit to End HIV/AIDS in America - where our movement can come together and collectively develop and learn strategies to end this epidemic. I can't think of a better celebration than the end of the AIDS epidemic.

2012 is going to be a very busy year. We will raise awareness of HIV/AIDS priorities during the presidential election, continue to advocate for full implementation of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, protect access and funding for critical HIV/AIDS programs, all while preparing to welcome the International AIDS Conference (IAC) back to the United States for the first time in 21 years.

Despite this packed agenda, NMAC believes that this year's USCA will be the most critical yet! USCA is unlike any other conference or meeting in the country. It is the only conference solely devoted to the community response to this epidemic. It includes an amazing cross section of the movement--from people living with HIV or AIDS and care providers to researchers and government representatives. This epidemic will not be defeated from Washington or from Atlanta - it will require the full cooperation and buy-in of the community. This year's USCA will provide a place to foster that collaboration and develop strategies to accomplish that goal.

While we believe that this year's conference is extremely important, we understand that our community continues to face fiscal constraints, and that 2012's packed agenda will only exacerbate this fact. In an effort to minimize the financial impact on constituents, NMAC has worked hard to keep the costs of this year's USCA to a minimum. In this sense, Las Vegas is the perfect venue, because it's the only city where we can hold our meeting and get hotel rooms for $60 per night.

2012 is going to be an historic and important year! We're planning to end the HIV/AIDS epidemic in America. That's huge and we need everyone to participate if we're going to be successful!

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