Fighting Two Epidemics: HIV and the Mass Incarceration of LGBTQ People

An interview with Tremaine Jones, who creates space for Black GBQ/SGL men

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Tremaine Jones is a project director with the Freedom Fund, a national organization dedicated to securing the release and safety of LGBTQ people held in detention. Recognizing that the HIV epidemic is intricately intertwined with the mass incarceration of the LGBTQ community, Jones works for raise awareness of the twin epidemics.

“As a Black queer man living in the South, I know I am at a higher risk for getting HIV and being incarcerated in my lifetime,” Jones shared. “Advocating, marching and uplifting those who are also impacted on these issues gives me hope and inspiration that we can end HIV and mass incarceration.”

Jones is a part of AIDS United’s first-ever class of the Fund for Resilience, Equity and Engagement and the Transgender Leadership Initiative Leadership Development Program. These leaders were chosen through AIDS United’s grantee partner organizations as representatives of transgender and gender-nonconforming people and Black gay, bisexual, queer and same-gender-loving men—populations in our communities most disproportionately impacted by HIV.

We caught up with Jones to learn more about his story and how he works to mobilize his community to stop HIV together.

How did you get into this work?

I got into doing HIV advocacy and prevention back in 2008. The year before, a close friend of mine was diagnosed with HIV. I got into doing this work because I wanted to educate myself and look at ways of supporting my friend as well as other people who didn’t have a support system. Several years later I worked as a case manager for people living with HIV and those at high risk. Most of my clients at the time were people who had been recently incarcerated or had a history of incarceration. I noticed the impact that incarceration had on people living with HIV—mainly that health and adherence to medication outcomes were lower compared to those who didn’t have a history.

More personally, I got into this work because I am a Black, queer man who lives in the South. I also live, work and play in one of the three counties (Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach) in the

United States known for high HIV transmission. Mass incarceration and HIV are two connected issues that impact me and people who look like me and have similar identities. Though I am HIV negative and have never been incarcerated, these issues have impacted me personally with having friends, partners and family who are living with these experiences.

How do we start to reduce the barriers preventing Black gay, bisexual, queer and same-gender-loving (GBQ/SGL) men from accessing care?

Stigma is a large barrier to care for Black GBQ/SGL men. Many Black GBQ/SGL men are interested in getting access to these services; however, [they] are concerned with being judged by their peers or community. Having community dialogues [helps] voice concerns and discuss the importance of these life-saving services. In this townhall, there can be an opportunity to have organizations available to meet with community members to provide services directly.

A lack of services available outside of areas where Black GBQ/SGL men live is another barrier. In Broward and Miami-Dade counties, I see that most of the organizations providing these services are located on the eastern and northern side. I feel there needs to be focus groups of Black GBQ/SGL to address the lack of services to local health departments.

A third barrier is a lack of knowledge. Due to there being a lack of services outside of areas where Black GBQ/SGL men live, there are still people who don't know what opportunities there are. Hiring and paying a good wage to clients when there are opportunities to educate their peers.

What are some of the challenges preventing Black GBQ/SGL men from being in executive leadership roles? What are some of the solutions to addressing those challenges?

Lack of community investment is a huge challenge. Growing up in South Florida, I saw few spaces that invested in Black SGL men. I would love to create a cohort of Black SGL men to bring in professionals to develop skills, leadership development, networking, social issues, job opportunities and basic life skills.

I would love to create a space for Black GBQ/SGL men in South Florida to network, meet, exchange contacts and look at ways of investing in upcoming leaders and support those in executive roles.

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