HIV Conferences – What use are they and how much do they cost?

April 2, 2018 By Andrew Spieldenner, PhD

In HIV, we wonder if conferences are useful. In every other field I've been active in - comic books, fashion retail, public health, academia - this is not a question. Conferences are places for professional development and community building. In HIV, this is split partially because the professionals (known as AIDS, Inc. in some circles) and the community are often quite different. I want to look at the International AIDS Conference with this lens. I hope to broaden a conversation currently happening about AIDS2020 (the International AIDS Conference to be held in 2020).

How could people living with HIV be against the International AIDS Conference?

This past month, the International AIDS Society announced San Francisco/Oakland as the site for the International AIDS Conference 2020. The HIV Caucus met with dozens of organizations and advocates – domestically and globally – to discuss this announcement and the selection process. Considering the challenges with AIDS 2012 – held in Washington, D.C. under a much more amenable administration – we did not see how most of our constituents would be able to attend (our complete letter with reasons can be found here, the letter from international Civil Society groups is here). We joined with around 70 organizations and over 200 individuals to ask that they reconsider.

Other organizations celebrated the announcement. This was, for them, a way to celebrate the many successes of San Francisco in the HIV epidemic – and there are many. But globally, even in this country, the HIV epidemic does not look like San Francisco.

Are HIV conferences important?

I remember my first HIV conference – the 1993 National Congress on the state of HIV and AIDS in Racial and Ethnic Communities (I think it was called) in Washington, D.C. (which has since become the U.S. Conference on AIDS – USCA). I presented on youth issues; I met extraordinary people; people listened and engaged me as an HIV activist. At least in this space, my voice mattered. Even as other doors were invisible or remained shut in other parts of my (then) 21 year-old, broke, brown, gay life. I have had the good fortune to attend USCA several times, and even served on the planning committee a couple times. While I am now skeptical of much at these events, over and over, I see the transformation that people new to the field go through as they attend a national professional conference.

Are there challenges every year at USCA?

Of course. There is always a session that didn't get programmed, a topic that was not covered, or even a presenter that offends whole communities. Generally these have been due to the lack - at the conference planning level - of inclusion or focus on trans* folks, sex workers and people who use drugs. There have been protests at USCA, and there will be again. I've known Paul Kawata (NMAC's ED) a long time, and he is always willing to listen and try to ameliorate the problems. He wants our community to be united and whole.

So if conferences can be important to professional and community development, why are organizations against the International AIDS Conference coming to the Bay Area?

While the conference is certainly accessible to large AIDS Service Organizations, Federally Qualified Health Centers, pharmaceutical companies, and most HIV researchers, it is not for the wide community of people living with HIV and other HIV advocates in this country. In fact, even with large organizations, only a couple staff will be sent (generally the Chief Executive Officer and the Vice-President). The registration fee runs around $1000 USD, and this does not count residential stays in the Bay Area for one week – one of the most expensive cities in the country (say you find a bargain at $200 a night for 7 nights at an additional $1400 USD, not counting taxes, food and entertainment). Only a limited number of scholarships will be available. In my 25-year history working in HIV, I have only been to the International AIDS Conference once.

In addition, there are other barriers to an international conference. In 2012, separate satellite meetings had to be done for sex workers and people who use drugs, who were largely unable to get visas due to U.S. travel policies. Other international conferences have had the same experience – the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women meeting faced this challenge in New York last month where young women were denied entry because of visa policies.

When these groups are excluded from participating and engaging in the main conference, who is the International AIDS Conference for?

If it is intended as a means of bringing together the global HIV community, then key parts of our community will not be able to attend in San Francisco, CA. No matter how much the local advocates say otherwise.

I understand the financial boon of the International AIDS Conference. I have worked at agencies where the annual conference was a key fundraising tool through registrations and sponsorships. It is mindboggling that the International AIDS Society did not get any bids from countries in the Global South (I have managed much smaller conferences and never had a shortage of bids). The estimated 15,000 people attending the International AIDS Conference has an impact the local community. I grew up in the Bay Area, and I am quite familiar with the differences socially, politically and economically between San Francisco and Oakland. I can see the hope that Oakland will benefit from this conference.

I now live on the U.S.-Mexico border. I go to Mexico at least once per month. Each time, I field belligerent questions re-entering the United States, and I experience fear as I walk across the border under the glares from stern and armed immigration officers. And I have a U.S. passport. At my university, we work hard to protect our DACA students, as well as the students in mixed-immigration status families. It is common to see ICE blockades on the freeway, pulling cars over to check for papers. This is the reality of the current administration.

And this is just Mexico. I am not even addressing the barriers when coming from a Muslim country, Haiti, most of Africa, El Salvador and Venezuela. Like many, I protested the attack on immigrants multiple times last year. By 2020, I do not see how immigration policy barriers become, as the Bay Area activists insist, reformed, repealed and more humane.

The coalition that brought the bid to International AIDS Society did not address why the national and international networks of people living with HIV that they approached did not support the bid. Rather they moved forward, and now are surprised at the criticism. What does it mean if you consult with networks of people living with HIV and you don’t care what they say?

The core question remains, if key groups cannot attend, who is this conference for?

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/hiv-conferences-utility-costs