The Loneliness Epidemic

As a hugger in training, NMAC executive director Paul Kawata encourages everyone to attend USCA 2018 in Orlando.

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Please read this important article about how loneliness is an epidemic in America. While I think it can be a problem for anyone, loneliness seems particularly challenging for the HIV community and LGBT people. We work in an epidemic that has taken more friends than we remember.

Our work started so that no one would have to die alone, but what happens when you outlive everyone you loved? For LGBT people, far too often our families and/or friends reject us or are just not invested in our lives. Per my mother, I know she loves me, but she just doesn't want to know. She has never been to a USCA even though I've invited her multiple times.

We idealize the rugged individualist who speaks truth to power. Work from home because we can get more done. Believe that we can muscle through by ourselves. Asking for help is a sign of weakness. Create systems that require interactions with computers, not people (think ADP, Anybill, Trakstar, Basecamp). Send emails rather than speak to the person three desks over in order to document the conversation when there never was any talking.



Too many of us believe that loneliness is our fault and don't realize that the system is set up for us to be lonely. This is particularly true for Washington, DC. As President Truman said, "if you want a friend in Washington, get a dog." Washington is not a city that is built on friendships; it's all about politics. What can you do for me rather than how can I help?

Part of why the United States Conference on AIDS is so successful is because it is a family reunion. It is the one place every year to see friends who live in other cities. It's not another impersonal

business conference. USCA is hugs, laughter and tears. Yes, there is lots of learning, but in a



world that can sometimes be cold and lonely, this meeting offers community a refuge from Trump's America.

You would probably never know it from seeing me at USCA, but I am not a natural hugger. I'm Asian. I had to overcome my concerns about touching strangers. Recently, I hugged Dr. Redfield, the new director of the CDC. I don't think researchers are natural huggers. I hug everyone at USCA to set the standard that hugging is not only OK, it's good. I hug everyone so they know they are not alone. I hug because it feels good and lets me know that I am not alone.



However, don't take my hugs as a sign of weakness. Too many have learned at their own peril. Right now, we need each other more than ever. We are about to build a plan to end the HIV epidemic in America. On the other side of loneliness is friendship.

This process could put our friendships to the test, so please come to USCA to reconnect with the people and programs who are just as committed as you. Who will not only help you to end the epidemic, but will also help you to know that you are not alone. See you in Orlando.

Yours in the struggle,



Paul Kawata
Hugger in Training



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