Modernizing HIV Laws and Looking Forward to AIDSWatch [VIDEO]

North Carolina AIDS Action Network's Christina Adeleke isn't afraid to dream big!

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Christina Adeleke serves as the Policy and Communications Manager at the North Carolina AIDS Action Network (NCAAN), where she has worked since 2016. A lawyer and self-proclaimed policy nerd, Christina is a long-time advocate for people living with and affected by HIV.

We caught up with Christina to learn about her advocacy to reform HIV criminal laws and how she's gearing up for AIDSWatch, the largest domestic HIV advocacy event in the country! AIDSWatch takes place April 1-2, but you can still register here. And you can learn more in the video below.

Chistina, tell me a bit about yourself and how you got involved in this work?

I was born and raised in Miami, FL, and moved to North Carolina for law school and decided to stay in Charlotte to start my career. I have always been passionate about advocating for those who are unable to do so for themselves, while also helping people advocate for themselves. That led me to attend law school. I knew that a pivotal way to truly help people was to work to create and reform policies that impact their daily lives. While in law school, I learned about HIV criminalization laws and was appalled to know that such laws existed and wanted to work to make changes on that front. I was given the opportunity to join the NCAAN team in 2016 and knew that it would be an amazing opportunity to do more work with HIV criminalization and in the broader public health space.

NCAAN is organizing scholarships for North Carolina advocates to attend AIDSWatch this year. How did that process come about?

North Carolina HIV advocates have always been really active and hungry to be involved in the advocacy process. We found that we have consistently had a large group from North Carolina attend AIDSWatch and leave inspired by the experience. We also heard from advocates that they would love to attend if they were financially able to do so. We decided that it would be a great opportunity to create the scholarship fund in order to financially assist advocates who wanted to

participate in AIDSWatch and carry that energy back into their communities.

What have been the highlights of your experience attending AIDSWatch? What advice would you share with someone attending AIDSWatch for the first time?

AIDSWatch is definitely one of the highlights of my year. As a lawyer and policy nerd, just being in Washington, DC, and seeing all of the monuments, museums and historical buildings is an experience in itself. Walking the halls of Congress with HIV advocates from all over the country (and the world) and seeing advocates who have never shared their stories, let alone visit with legislators, take a step of courage and share their stories with their legislators and their staff is remarkably inspiring and reminds me of the power of personal stories hold and its game-changing impact on the advocacy process.

My advice to first time AIDSWatch attendees would be to not be scared or intimidated during your legislative meetings. Always remember that our legislators work for us and we are the experts in our lives and personal stories. You may not know every HIV statistic, and that is ok. Your voice matters, and you deserve to be heard. Own it.

NCAAN was instrumental in the recent reform of HIV criminal law in North Carolina. What did you learn through that experience?

In 2018, NCAAN had the honor to successfully modernize North Carolina's HIV criminalization laws to remove stigmatizing language and to have the laws reflect modern science and recent medical advancements. Doing advocacy and legislative reform in the South for a few years taught me a lot about patience and how hard it is to build consensus with people from different backgrounds on a particular issue, especially when that issue hits home for that specific person.

I was able to see that every decision and compromise that is made has a real impact on people's lives and it is essential to include people directly impacted in the process. I also learned to not be scared to dream big. At first, the idea of modernizing North Carolina's HIV criminalization laws in our current political climate seemed like a lofty dream, but we were brave and set our intention to

start the reform process and we succeeded.

How do you stay motivated in this work?

Remembering why I do what I do, which is to help people, empower them to be their best selves and change the world. Being able to see the real-life impact of the work that we do in people's lives is humbling and inspires me to keep going, even when it is challenging. When I get stressed or discouraged, I always have to remind myself that it does not all rest on me. It truly takes a village to change the world and I am happy to play my small role in that process.

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