Moving Forward on Marriage Equality

June 5, 2013 By David Ernesto Munar

On Friday, May 31, the Illinois House of Representatives failed to vote on a bill (SB 10) that would have brought marriage equality to the state. The AIDS Foundation of Chicago (AFC) has long advocated for gay rights as a means to destigmatize HIV/AIDS, and in the wake of the House's inaction, David Ernesto Munar, AFC's CEO/President, wrote this editorial.

Reflection on past struggles--and the sage quotes of great leaders--began to soothe my roller-coaster of emotions.

"The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice."--Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

For Illinois' LGBTQ communities, it is devastating to have our dream for full and equal access to legal marriage deferred by a reticent General Assembly. Like it or not, this is the "long arc" of the struggle.

We campaigned for 14 prolonged years before successfully securing an amendment to the state's Human Rights Act banning discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender expression. And just two years ago, our passionate community won the right to form civil unions. On marriage equality, political realities demand we mount an even more tenacious campaign.

We must remain laser focused on a path to victory but already our hurt and anger is turning inward, against our allies and each other, fretfully jeopardizing our unity and effectiveness.

For example, some people are casting blame on the Black and Latino Caucuses for the last-minute erosion of legislative support. As a block, these 30 members wield considerable influence in the 118-member state House, but their districts and views are by no means monolithic. The members include stalwart supporters and detractors of marriage equality. We can win more support among them but only by respecting their diversity of views. Blaming them for the stalled effort might have the opposite effect.

Less talked about, but certainly more significant, is the paltry support afforded the measure by the 47-member GOP caucus (all Caucasian, by the way). Just two Republicans are on record supporting the bill.

No doubt, a legislative setback merits deep evaluation, introspection, and recalibration. Our march toward full and equal marriage will benefit from it but we must resist haste in assigning blame.

“Victory has a thousand fathers, but defeat is an orphan.”--John F. Kennedy

Rep. Greg Harris reminded me of this eloquent quote as we lamented the fraying of legislative support for marriage equality as the 2013 Spring Session drew to a close Friday. His decision to postpone the bill’s consideration by the full chamber for a day when passage would be assured has caused deep consternation and second-guessing.

Some are blaming him for the stalled campaign for marriage equality. Others question his integrity, leadership and judgment, arguing that a roll-call vote--even on a bill destined to fail--would at least expose our supporters and detractors.

Having worked on legislative affairs for more than 20 years, I am convinced Greg made a heart-wrenching but rational decision. In legislative circles, nothing tarnishes an issue more than a failed vote. Lack of passage on Friday would have certainly ended any prospects of advancing the measure this year but it might have also set back the campaign for years or decades to come.

Once an effort fails on the legislative floor, recovery becomes exponentially more difficult. Lawmakers voting no are reluctant to switch their votes--flip-flopping is political heresy. And supporters resent being made to cast a controversial vote on an effort that guarantees constituents on both sides of the issue will be unsatisfied.

At AIDS Foundation of Chicago, my colleagues, legislative allies and I have worked on many controversial pieces of legislation that required just such calculations. For example, state Rep. Sara Feigenholtz worked tirelessly on sterile syringe access legislation from 1998 to 2003 that inched closer to passage each year. Our field and lobbying campaign and her political acumen (peppered by tenacity and patience) paid off. Though we had aligned the needed votes for passage, nothing was assured until actual votes were cast. We even stationed volunteers at each door as Feigenholtz debated the bill to assure no supporter exited the chamber before casting a vote in favor of the measure.

More than a legislative victory, public health won: By 2008, HIV infections from injection drug use declined by 60 percent.

Earlier this year, two other multi-year efforts finally achieved victory. A coalition of ally organizations prevailed in championing passage of comprehensive sexuality education legislation. And lawmakers finally repealed an antiquated and dangerous measure requiring public health to notify school principals of an HIV-positive student, which can heighten stigma and discrimination and leave the child no better off and often worse.

In legislative advocacy, a coalition can do everything perfectly and still not prevail as witnessed by proponents of pension reform. Many dynamics beyond ones control are at play in marshaling such a diverse and opinionated group of leaders on a single issue.

For our opponents--those who believe in marriage inequality--the sweetest comeuppance will be

not only advancing our cause to victory but participating in the democratic process that determines who earns the privilege to represent us in the people's chamber. I am reminded of another emblematic quote about the power of coalition building, unity and organizing:

"Never underestimate the power of a few committed people to change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."--Margaret Mead

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