Why National Gay Men's HIV/AIDS Awareness Day Is As Important As Ever

Gay and bisexual men comprise 2 percent of the U.S. population but more than half of people living with HIV.

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National Gay Men's HIV/AIDS Awareness Day (#NGMHAAD) is on Wednesday, September 27, a day that should be focused on action toward ending this global epidemic. The following is a guest post by Richard George III, GMHC Policy Intern.

At Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) we know that National Gay Men's HIV/AIDS Awareness Day is just as important in 2017 as it would have been in 1982, when our organization was incorporated to serve gay men living with or affected by HIV/AIDS in New York City. Men who have sex with men (MSM) are still disproportionately infected and affected by HIV—especially young MSM ages 13 to 24, who make up 92 percent of new HIV infections among all men in their age group.

MSM comprise 2 percent of the U.S. population yet represent more than half of the people living with HIV. As a community, we can help MSM fight HIV/AIDS in various ways, including promoting education about the virus and fostering safe spaces for these individuals. Additionally, health care providers should work with their MSM patients to ensure they are regularly tested for HIV. According to the CDC (2014), 1 in 7 MSM living with HIV are undiagnosed. And since we know that people living with HIV who are adherent to their treatment regimen are no longer able to transmit their virus to sexual partners, it is imperative that everyone who is positive has access, and adheres, to treatment. This means that people living with HIV can still experience full lives, including starting families, and even enhance their sex lives by eliminating fear of infectiousness.

We also know that due to the heavy instances of discrimination MSM face, they are more likely to be afflicted by mental health disparities, lower levels of education, poverty, homelessness, and many other factors that contribute to negative life outcomes. Considering all of this, we can begin to understand why MSM are so disproportionately affected by HIV since there is an intersectional relationship between HIV/AIDS and MSM. Moreover, we are also aware that people of color tend to be heavily affected by issues of social identification, leading to even less successful life outcomes when coupled with their sexuality.

Research shows that Black and Hispanic/Latino men are disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS. For example, if HIV incidence trends persist, 1 in 2 black MSM will be diagnosed with HIV in their lifetime. Similarly, 1 in 4 Latino MSM will contract HIV in their lifetime. These figures are troubling and we, not only as a community but also as a society, must come together to focus on the ways we can end the HIV epidemic.

GMHC proudly supports Gay Men's HIV/AIDS Awareness Day since most of our work is focused toward people living with HIV/AIDS. When GMHC was first organized in 1982, we dedicated our work toward helping people living with HIV/AIDS to die with dignity. Now, with the presence of antiretrovirals (ARVs), in addition to helping people live with dignity, we're working toward a future without HIV/AIDS. This can be accomplished by increasing access to STI testing in the MSM community, raising awareness about HIV/AIDS in MSM populations, and furthering our own knowledge of HIV/AIDS—for example, the innovative research surrounding the "Undetectable=Untransmittable" (or "U=U") campaign. GMHC stands, and will continue to stand, with all people who are affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

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