Opening Session of 2009 HIV Prevention Conference

August 23, 2009 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

I'm attending the 2009 National HIV Prevention Conference in Atlanta this week to participate in a panel on Tuesday about using new media effectively as a tool for HIV prevention. Sunday was the opening session of the conference and I'd like to share some highlights.

Tom Frieden, the new director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), gave a videotaped welcome to the crowd. His mention of the Obama administration being committed to HIV prevention got a big applause from the crowd.

Kevin Fenton, the director of the National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD and TB Prevention (NCHSTP) at the CDC, was in person and also got a big applause when he mentioned the Obama administration. Fenton emphasized routine HIV testing as one of the important keys to reducing new HIV infections.

Fenton introduced a special video message from Jamie Foxx introducing "I Know" as the second stage of the "Act Against AIDS" campaign. Other celebrities in this new series of messages included Jody Watley and Beverly Johnson.

He also mentioned that Tuesday evening would be the first in a series of town hall meetings by the Office of National AIDS Policy to get input from the HIV/AIDS community on forming a national AIDS strategy.

Then our own Regan Hofmann, editor-in-chief of POZ, took the stage to moderate stories from people with HIV, including her own.

She shared an anecdote of someone being surprised at her being HIV positive. "Twenty years into the epidemic, it shouldn't shock anyone that I have HIV," she said.

Regan also talked about how the fight against breast cancer evolved and has found widespread support.

"We need to make fighting AIDS just as cool," she said. She received a slow but steady standing ovation, which started a trend for each following speaker.

The stories of people with HIV included: Craig Washington of AID Atlanta, who shared his experience as an African-American gay man, stated the importance of destigmatizing queerness in communities of color; Cecilia Chung of the San Francisco Human Rights Commission, who shared her experience as an Asian-American transgender woman, stated that topics such as immigration and economic justice are

linked to the fight against HIV/AIDS; David Munar of AIDS Foundation of Chicago, who shared his perspective on health care reform as a “game-changing” development, wore a T-shirt with the phone number 800-828-0498 encouraging people to call Congress; and Del Rosa Harris of SisterLove, who gave a great quote in reference to black women not feeling empowered enough to change their behavior: “HIV is a symptom of this disease.”

Then Magic Johnson spoke and also gave a great quote: “I’ve been good for HIV, but I’ve also been like a curse.”

He explained that he understood that too many people took his example of being able to live successfully with HIV too far, not understanding the real world consequences of having to take HIV meds and dealing with HIV stigma.

During his speech, Magic walked around the cavernous auditorium, which was lined with pieces from the AIDS quilt. He was followed by dozens of admirers seeking photos with him, adding an unusually festive atmosphere to the serious subject matter.

Magic was challenged by a member of the audience to repeat the aforementioned quote as part of a media campaign to the general public. He responded by mentioning a new partnership with the CDC wherein he may address that subject.

Jonathan Mermin, director of the Division of HIV/AIDS at the NCHSTP, then gave a presentation on the state of the epidemic. Some of the points that stayed with me were: what if 20 percent (not the current 5 percent) of the federal budget were spent on HIV prevention; effective HIV prevention would save us billions of dollars; routine HIV testing is key because knowledge of HIV status is an effective prevention tool.

The session ended with a performance by the Atlanta Gay Men’s Chorus. Of the three songs they performed, I was most impressed with their version of “Over the Rainbow.” It promises to be an informative and energetic conference.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.