How to Be Proactive in Challenging Times

HIV and health care advocates are definitely on the defensive, but the game is far from over. [Bonus: VIDEO]

May 27, 2017 By Matthew Rose

As I sit in Washington, DC, doing the day in and day out work of trying to make sense of what I believe to be tea leaves, I can't help but think about one of my favorite sports. I know it might seem like a strange aside, but just follow me for a bit and trust it will make sense. You see, when I'm not pouring over health policy and its effects in the HIV space, I unwind by watching tennis. It is one of those sports in which trying to understand the game can transform your appreciation of it. Similarly, to many outsiders, watching tennis can be a good analogy to following politics. Tennis is a game where one lobs a ball back and forth across a net, and it uses a scoring system that makes very little sense to most people. See the parallels to our current political climate? This is something I think we in the advocacy world need to think about.

One of the true hallmarks of a great tennis player is tactics, and many of the greats share one essential skill—their ability to turn defense into offense. They can weather the storm of their opponents and then capitalize, with near perfect execution, the right shot that results in a winner. Think of the tennis masters through history: Arthur Ashe, Althea Gibson and present day Serena Williams. They all learned this essential skill, how to read their opponent and the game and how to pick the right moment to shift their defense, and then how to execute it at their highest level. It's a skill that mixes tactics, practice, preparation and execution into an explosive and efficient package that can tilt the match.

(Yes this video shows Rafa Nadal, but he's one of my favorites so sue me.)

Right now in the political landscape, we are like that embattled tennis player. Trying to find our way to just stay on the court. Battling back with everything we have just to keep the game going because we know that the stakes are real and at the highest level. We have to keep taking in data and learning how to craft our most powerful shots. We have to do the reps, practice all the precise pieces needed to make those movements second nature—and we have to prepare for what victory should look like. For when the window opens, we will have to strike with ruthless efficiency like all great champions. Also, we need to know that we can drop points here and there but never losing sight of the big points. Sometimes despite our best defense, we will lose a few points—maybe even a game—but we will still get up to play the big points of the match.

Now that you've followed me this far, you're probably thinking, "Dude, you just told me why you love tennis, but I thought I was going to hear about HIV policy." And the answer is simple. Well, maybe not that simple if I haven't made it clear now. But the answers lie in these questions: How in this era of defense do we plan for an offensive? How do we practice to the point where our great shot is just muscle memory? How do we reach the point where we find ourselves in a position to unleash our power and grace in full commitment to our purpose?

Let's look at an example from the real world. In the current health reform landscape, every time we try to delay a GOP bill to take away health care, we are playing defense. We do this when we apply local pressure, by organizing big crowds and pushing back at the district level during town hall meetings. As a result of that defense, a Republican government that has voted to repeal the Affordable Care Act (ACA, or Obamacare) several times has been unable to claim victory. We have also changed the game from repeal, repeal and delay to repeal and replace. We have made the Republicans take a position on making legislation that was never their priority. And we've made some Republicans realize the importance of health care. It's a constant battle, but it's working.

The best thing is that we've done this before in our HIV movement. We've learned how to make the right strategic moves at the right time to capitalize on it. In fact, our work is now a gold standard for patient-centered responses to health crises. We need to go back in time to some of those early lessons that helped us get here. We need to review moments like ACT UP protesting at the National Institutes of Health and in the streets of the U.S. cities, and moments like the first time the AIDS Quilt hit Washington, DC, or when a senator cared about the story of a boy named Ryan White. Think about those early days of treatment when we taught ourselves to become experts in the science of HIV so we could be saving lives. These skills are equally appropriate for modern days. Because it's never been an easy road in the world of HIV, we've had to fight and defend and strike at the right moment with everything we have.

As part of our defense, we must remind everyone that compassion and caring changed the world and that we've earned major gains because of what we've done. Now is the time to think about planning for the ending of this epidemic. We must remind everyone about the importance of all the work that we do, and we must ensure that the needs of vulnerable communities and people living with HIV are included in most major conversations. We must have discussions about what we need around housing, jobs, sexual education, community building, etc.—pieces that can help change the conversations around social determinants of HIV. We can make our defense protect us until we are in a position to take our winning shot.

But to make all this work, we must begin to think about what that winning shot looks like. If you only have a few decisive points to win the match, how do you know what and when to hit? The answer is to focus and to practice with a variety of weapons ready to be deployed when the opportunity presents itself. For example, we have to be ready to pivot on how HIV work is incorporated in larger narratives about collectively improving lives and prosperity.

So think tennis, and practice your shots. Write your ideas down and develop them to hone them to a cutting edge. Try your thoughts out on friends, thought leaders, elders and those who have

connection and passions. Drill down to the concise, impactful elements that can carry your message forward when the moment presents itself. Hone your weapons so they’re ready for that moment. We won’t be playing defense forever, but by maximizing the opportunities we have, we can make big impacts—and we can eventually hit a true winner.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/proactive-challenging-times