The Well Project at the US Conference on HIV/AIDS 2025

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By Olivia G. Ford

This year's US Conference on HIV/AIDS (USCHA 2025) descended on Washington, DC, as it tends to every other September, amid turmoil and uncertainty in the nation's capital.

We are living in particularly intense times, so it does seem that each year, something happens in the city where USCHA is scheduled to commence that makes it ill-advised to hold the conference there. In 2022 and 2024, it was hurricanes; this year, the current US administration's vengeful, baseless occupation of the progressive chocolate city of DC by federal troops commenced just days before USCHA was to begin. Nevertheless, several thousand advocates made the trip, and the show went on. Members of The Well Project's community were involved in the conference on various levels, reporting on as well as presenting at the nation's largest HIV community meeting.

The theme of the gathering was Aging with HIV, and all sessions incorporated that crucial lens in some way. On that topic, it was heartening to see many members of our community who identify as lifetime survivors and/or Dandelions, getting their flowers while shifting narratives and opening eyes as presenters and coordinators of a robust "Dandelions and Lifetime Survivors" conference session track. This track at this year's conference is a result of lifetime survivors organizing around USCHA 2023, also held in DC, taking the plenary stage with incisive demands and effectively launching a movement.

Guided by Dandelion leadership and expertise, the session track covered complex topics ranging from pleasure, to trauma, multiple perspectives on parenting as (and being parented by) people living with HIV, to financial planning for a future they may have been told they'd never reach. There remains much work to do, attention to be paid, investment to be leveled, research to be conducted, respect to be given, when it comes to lifetime survivors. But this unavoidable presence at the conference appears to be part of a powerful step forward.

The Well Project's team and extended community were spread across many tracks at the conference. In addition to sitting on panels and contributing to other events, members of our staff developed three sessions. On the first full day of USCHA 2025, stakeholder liaison Bridgette Picou, LVN, ACLPN – who also served on the conference planning committee – presented "Exploring Reproductive Aging in Women Living with HIV." The workshop delved into the latest research and insights into how HIV and its treatment impact the reproductive aging process, and by turns the aging processes of women. This session also featured The Well Project board of directors chair Linda Scruggs, DHL, MHS, LPC.

The same day, Ciarra "Ci Ci" Covin, MS, HS-BCP, The Well Project's director of community programming, was among the panelists of "Unlearning Survival: Mental Health and the Burdened Woman," alongside a roster of phenomenal women who also happen to all be current or former members of The Well Project's community advisory board (CAB): Masonia Traylor, Ieshia Scott, and Lynette Trawick, with Kim Canady moderating. This session tackled the intersection of mental health, identity, and survival for women – particularly Black and brown women – navigating the weight of caregiving, perfectionism, and unspoken emotional labor. CAB emerita member and wonderful community writer Katie Willingham was in the room for that session and wrote up some of her takeaways.

The next day, Katie also attended a session Picou developed with editorial director Olivia G. Ford, who moderated, and that featured CAB member Tiommi Luckett and longtime collaborator Tonia

Poteat, PhD, MPH, PA-C. During the session, titled “Facilitating Engagement Between Women and Providers About Sex and Pleasure,” panelists shared responses to questions like “What are challenges and opportunities in lifting up conversations and comfort around pleasure that you have witnessed in your life and work?” “I came away from this with a different perspective about pleasure as a healthcare tool, healing physical and emotional health in women one orgasm at a time, so to speak,” Katie wrote.

Katie also wrote up two dynamic sessions in which she herself was a panelist, and an integral part: "Living, Thriving, and Demanding Better: Aging with HIV in a Shifting Political Climate“ and ”Equity In Aging: Tailored HIV Care for Older Women." Both workshops addressed gaps in meeting the needs of people aging with HIV from different key angles.

In The Well Project’s booth in the exhibit hall, we had the opportunity to talk about and promote a range of materials from the same SHE/HER/THEY program that informed our pleasure-centered session. This included sharing our sexual health conversation guide for clinicians; unveiling our new “Get the Facts” pamphlet, "Caring for Your Whole Self" (check it out and order free copies – ¡disponible en español!) alongside our classic “Get the Facts”; promoting our survey on language and HIV care for women living with HIV (see flyer for details and to participate); and welcoming a stream of visitors to our booth, nearly 200 of whom will now receive our newsletters.

Most important, the booth became a meeting place for our team, CAB, partners, and longtime friends to just enjoy each other’s company, support each other’s work, hear one another’s concerns, and feel the love. It bears repeating in these times, but at the end of the day, what else is there but to cultivate and strengthen bonds of community?

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The Well Project is a non-profit organization whose mission is to change the course of the HIV/AIDS pandemic through a unique and comprehensive focus on women and girls across the gender spectrum. Visit their website, www.thewellproject.org, to access fact sheets (English and Spanish), blogs, and advocacy tools, and to join a global community of women living with HIV.

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