The Role of Housing and the Black Church in HIV in America

"We can't be afraid to discuss the needs of gay men and trans women. When we do that, we'll see real change."

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All too often when politicians and policy makers discuss HIV care in America, they do so in a manner that focuses overwhelmingly on the medical and the pharmaceutical to the exclusion of the spiritual, the fiscal, and the social. There's certainly no debating the importance of expert medical care and highly effective antiretroviral therapies to the health and wellbeing of people living with HIV, but those things alone cannot bring about the end of the AIDS epidemic and, in many cases, cannot find their way to those who need them most. At last week's Congressional Black Caucus Foundation Annual Legislative Conference, Representatives Barbara Lee (D-CA) and Keith Ellison (D-MN) bucked that trend by hosting a pair of panel discussions that examined the impact of affordable rental housing on the health of the black community and the role that the black church has to play in fighting AIDS.

Representative Lee, a longtime leader in the fight against HIV hosted a session titled, The Tipping Point: Fast Tracking the End of AIDS. In her remarks Representative Lee noted the Congressional Black Caucus's resiliency and efforts in implementing important programs like PEPFAR, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and the Minority AIDS Initiative. Noting that we have the science and the tools we need to see an AIDS Free generation by 2030, she added that we just need to awaken the political will to implement innovative and effective strategies.

Much of the conversation in the session hosted by Congresswoman Lee's centered around the role of the black church in ending the stigma and discrimination associated with being HIV positive as well as with the perceived or actual LGBTQ identity. Historically, the black church has been the bedrock of many African American communities, not only providing a place for fellowship and spiritual growth but serving as a refuge from injustice and institutional discrimination and a haven for political discourse. However, the socially conservative teachings in some congregations have left many black people living with or at increased risk for HIV because they feel isolated by the church rather than embraced.

Panelist Venton C. Jones Jr., a Program Officer at National Black Justice Coalition, and AIDS United board of trustees member, suggested that instead of shaming individuals, we should be empowering them: stating that "you cannot tell a black person they don't have a place in the

black church.” In a follow up discussion with AIDS United, Mr. Jones addressed the need to involve the most marginalized sections of the community stating that “We can’t be afraid to discuss the needs of gay men and trans women…when we do that, that’s when we’ll see real change.”

A suggestion made repeatedly throughout the panel was the need to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic from the perspective of social justice and the issues that most impact black communities. In 2014, black men having sex with men accounted for 25% of new diagnoses, with all African Americans totaling 44% of new diagnoses despite comprising only 12% of the U.S. population. In light of this reality and their current understated role in fighting the AIDS epidemic, it is hard to deny that any public health strategy aimed at significantly improving HIV-related health outcomes in black communities needs to involve the black church.

“We must change the community dynamics and change the negative narrative of HIV in the black church”, said Jones. “We know it is still super important for organizations to have this conversation and push it within groups that may not be seen as change agents for people of color. We all have a role to play.”

Earlier during the conference, Representative Ellison ably shined a light on another sector of society with a crucial role to play in the fight against HIV: affordable rental housing. We can invent the most effective antiretroviral therapies in the world and create the most skilled interdisciplinary treatment teams, but if a person living with HIV doesn’t have a room of their own to lay their head at night, the odds of those therapies and interventions working for them aren’t great. Multiple times over the course of his session, Responding to the Affordable Rental Crisis, Ellison made it very clear that housing was health care too.

Few in the room seemed as pleased with Ellison’s impassioned defense of housing as a public health intervention as the National AIDS Housing Coalition’s Nancy Bernstine, who was a panelist at the event. “I think that Keith Ellison is a fantastic leader in Congress and, with respect to HOPWA, I feel like he got it,” Bernstine said. “I feel that he definitely gets the issue and understands that housing is health care.”

The CBCF Annual Legislative Conference (ALC) is the leading policy conference on issues impacting African Americans and the global black community. Thought leaders, legislators and concerned citizens engage on economic development, civil and social justice, public health and education issues. More than 9,000 people attend 70 public policy forums and much more. Join subject experts, industry leaders, elected officials and citizen activists to explore today’s issues from an African-American perspective.

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