Understanding The United States Conference on AIDS

August 13, 2019 By Paul Kawata

Are you excited for this year's United States Conference on AIDS? To help you navigate the meeting, here is some of the back story. This year's meeting will focus on the federal plan to end the domestic HIV epidemic. On October 1, 2019, 57 jurisdictions will start to build plans to end the HIV epidemic by 2030. The promise of biomedical HIV prevention gives real pathways to significantly reduce the number of new cases. The goal is to have fewer than 3,000 cases per year by 2030.

For the newbies to USCA, here's some of the back story. The meeting is the largest community-based HIV conference in America. Around 3,000 folks will join us this year. Thirty-five percent of the attendees are people living with HIV. Sixty-five percent are people of color. USCA works hard to reflect the HIV epidemic in all of its diversity.

For some people, their first time at USCA can be a little scary and overwhelming. This year there are 160 workshops, four plenaries, and long lines at registration. To help you navigate, join us for the USCA Orientation Webinar on Wednesday, August 21st at 3 PM (Eastern). Register now.

Attendees are both providers and the people jurisdictional plans need to reach. In the larger world, many of our attendees are stigmatized, marginalized, and made to feel less than. At USCA they are prioritized, heard, and made to feel like the color of their skin does not matter. There will be protests. Protests are in the DNA of our movement and something that NMAC supports. Learning to speak truth to power without violence is an important lesson for people who live on the margins. From the civil rights movement to the women's movement to the LGBTQ movement to ACT-UP, this is how we are heard.

The Opening Plenary will feature interviews with the federal leaders who wrote the plan. It will be NMAC's version of the Sunday Morning talk shows with Dr. Redfield (CDC), Dr. Fauci (NIAID), Rear Admiral Weahkee (IHS) and Dr. Cheever (HRSA). Saturday's plenary is a celebration of People Living with HIV & U=U. Sunday's closing plenary will be about PrEP and how to reach the communities that have not seen the promise of this science.

Training Opportunity

First and foremost, USCA is a training opportunity with 160 workshops. The conference uses a smartphone app to keep everyone informed. Go to Google Play or Apple app stores to download

the app. CDC and HRSA have pathways of workshops:

- PrEP and SSP Strategies to End HIV: Successes and Challenges
- Supporting Linkages, Retention and Rapid Antiretroviral Therapy (ART)
- How do we DIAGNOSE HIV Infections as soon as possible?
- Partnering for Public Health Response to End the HIV Epidemic
- Building on HRSA Programs' Infrastructure Supporting Ending the HIV Epidemic
- Community Engagement and Involvement of People with HIV
- Innovation through Implementation Science
- HRSA Ending the HIV Epidemic Listening Session
- Sesion para escuchar: Como acabar con la epidemia de VIH

Other pathways include: Faith, Fast Track cities, Health Care Providers, Hepatitis, Health Care Access, the South, STDs, Structural Interventions, Treatment/CFAR, and U=U. The 2019 Tracks include: Biomedical HIV Prevention, Ending the Epidemic, Gay Men, Leadership, Opioid Epidemic, PrEP for CBOs, People Living with HIV, Public Policy, Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming, Trauma-Informed Care, Women and Youth.

There is NO printed program book. Past evaluations said printed program books were not environmentally responsible and usually get thrown away. The best way to stay informed about USCA is to download the conference app. Go to Google Play or Apple app stores to download it. A PDF of the program book that you can download will also be available on the USCA website.

Building A Movement
Ending the epidemic in America requires a movement of people working collaboratively towards a common goal. USCA builds that movement by bringing together the diverse communities highly impacted by HIV to talk, train, and argue. What makes the meeting both dynamic and challenging is our diversity as marginalized people in America.

Unfortunately, HIV disproportionately impacts people who live outside of the mainstream. To end the epidemic, we must reach communities that don't trust the government or the systems that are put in place to help. Can you blame them? Daily we hear that we are less than, not valued, or disposable. The people who make it to USCA are empowered, but they work with, support, and speak on behalf of too many who are disenfranchised.

That is the great paradox. To end the epidemic, we need people living with HIV to stay in healthcare and be adherent to their meds. PLWH daily face discrimination, stigmatization, and criminalization from the systems that now needs them to end the epidemic. If we do not celebrate people living with HIV and their capacity to be undetectable, how will our efforts succeed? It is

difficult to celebrate people you do not know.

Some believe we just need to link people into healthcare and get them on meds. If only it were that easy. While that might work in the mainstream, it definitely does not speak to people who suffer from the trauma of racism, homophobia, sexism, transphobia, and addiction. When NMAC says this will be one of the biggest tests of our leadership, we mean it. Not only do we have to work across systems, but we also have to work with people who have different values, beliefs, and ideals.

Family Reunion
At its foundation, USCA is a family reunion. We celebrated that fact two years ago and it is still true today. The world can be a lonely and harsh place for people who are different. USCA is a place that celebrates what society shuns.

We celebrate the diversity of our family. If you cannot stand with that commitment, then please don't attend the meeting. Like all family reunions, there are disagreements. NMAC believes our disagreements makes us stronger, but sometimes it moves beyond disagreements to bullying. That's where we draw the line. Bullying, harassment, and violence are never OK. As marginalized people, we live in that reality every day. USCA is a safe space where differences are honored and privilege is minimized.

In other words, USCA is not your typical HIV meeting, but HIV is not your typical disease. On October 1st our nation will start planning to end the HIV epidemic in America. Plans are due by the end of the year. Who sits at the table and the agencies that implement the plans will make the difference between success or failure. It's up to us to fight for our communities. Thank you for joining us this very important year.

Yours in the struggle,

Paul Kawata
30 Years of Service

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