



United Towards Zero: Why the Fight Against HIV Stigma Matters

Zero HIV Stigma Day 2026 theme announced: United Towards Zero

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On World AIDS Day 2025, IAPAC and our partners GNP+ and Prevention Access Campaign (PAC) announce next year's Zero HIV Stigma Day theme, United Towards Zero, reflecting a renewed call to collective action at a time when unity is not just aspirational but essential. Against a backdrop of political polarization, misinformation, regressive policies, and widening inequities, the work of dismantling stigma demands greater urgency, clarity, and solidarity than ever before.

Undoubtedly, the fight against HIV stigma matters more than ever in these turbulent times of politically motivated shocks to the communities most vulnerable to HIV.

Stigma has always been a formidable barrier, but today it manifests in ways that are both familiar and newly complex. Social hostility, moral judgment, discrimination in health care settings, and structural barriers remain deeply embedded, but the current landscape adds layers of digital misinformation, the rollback of civil and human rights protections, and rising hostility toward marginalized communities, including LGBTQ+ people, transgender and gender diverse individuals, migrants, people who use drugs, and Black and Brown communities. These dynamics not only threaten individual well-being but weaken public health systems, drive people away from services, and endanger the progress made over four decades of work.

In this environment, the concept of ZERO stigma carries even greater weight. It is both a moral imperative and a measurable public health goal. Stigma is not simply an attitude; it is a determinant of health. It affects whether a person seeks testing, initiates and remains on treatment, trusts providers, discloses their status, or feels safe accessing prevention tools like PrEP. Research consistently shows that stigma leads to delayed diagnosis, lower viral suppression rates, and reduced utilization of services. In other words: stigma kills. Declaring a commitment to zero is a declaration that no one should be harmed or die because of judgment, prejudice, or dehumanization.

At the same time, ZERO is a unifying ambition, reminding us that the work of dismantling stigma does not belong to one sector or one community alone. People living with HIV have led this

movement, often at great personal cost, but the responsibility to end stigma belongs to everyone: health care providers, policymakers, educators, faith leaders, public health agencies, media partners, and the broader public. The “United” in this year’s theme is not rhetorical. Every time a clinician affirms U=U, every time a policymaker protects rights instead of eroding them, every time a public figure corrects misinformation, every time a neighbor pushes back against myths and fear – unity becomes real and stigma loses ground.

This moment in history also calls for more courage. Many countries, including the United States, are witnessing the resurgence of narratives that pathologize or target marginalized communities. Cuts to HIV programs, the dismantling of DEI initiatives, restrictions on gender-affirming care, and intensified attacks on sexual and reproductive rights create an atmosphere where stigma can flourish if left unchecked. Silence is no longer neutral; it is harmful. To move towards zero, we must counteract stigmatizing rhetoric and policy with evidence, compassion, and the insistence that every human being deserves respect, health, and safety.

Yet, there is also real, measurable, unprecedented hope. Scientific advancements such as long-acting PrEP and highly effective antiretroviral therapy have transformed what is possible. But while these innovations eliminate biological risk, they cannot eliminate HIV and intersectional stigma on their own, which is why a universal embrace of U=U is so critical in every community around the world. The gap between what science makes possible and what stigma still prevents continues to widen. Closing that gap requires reshaping culture as intentionally as we reshape HIV public policy or clinical practice.

This is why the theme United Towards Zero resonates so strongly as a theme for the next Zero HIV Stigma Day. It invites action at all levels and offers a future-oriented vision that refuses to settle for incremental change. It reframes the HIV stigma conversation not as a perpetual struggle, but as a solvable problem – if we choose to solve it together because it is only through unity of purpose that we achieve ambitious feats. To be clear, unity does not mean uniformity; it means alignment of purpose, in this case achieving a world where HIV stigma is defeated. Diverse communities, disciplines, and institutions – we all have different roles to play, but we can move in the same direction: towards zero stigma.

As we mark World AIDS Day today, let us honor the generations who fought to be seen, heard, and respected. Let us commit ourselves to finishing the work they began. Let us confront misinformation with truth, fear with compassion, and indifference with action. Let us create environments where seeking care is safe, where disclosure is an ordinary step in a supportive system, and where people living with HIV are affirmed as full participants in every aspect of life. And, as we prepare for Zero HIV Stigma Day 2026, let us advance a united front, convinced we can reach ZERO. There has never been a more important or more urgent time to get there.

This Zero HIV Stigma blog was written by Dr. José M. Zuniga, who is President/CEO of the International Association of Providers of AIDS Care (@IAPAC) and the Fast-Track Cities Institute (@FTC2030).

