U.S. Conference on HIV/AIDS — The Home Stretch

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October 13, 2020 By Paul Kawata

Six thousand people have registered to attend this year's United States Conference on HIV/AIDS (USCHA). Obviously, making the meeting free was a big contributor to this year's attendance. These are tough times and everyone is hurting, so NMAC didn't have another option. Thank you to our 2020 USCHA sponsors for standing with us and community.

This year's virtual conference will be unlike any USCHA. While it will never replace in-person meetings, we hope it will remind everyone that they are part of the HIV family. The Opening Plenary sets the tone for the meeting by examining how racism stops our work from being successful and blocks our efforts to end HIV. It is a tough plenary, particularly for White people with privilege. It's not enough to say you stand with Black lives; you also have to do the work. You have to hear and understand the stories of Black and Brown people and how racism impacts our daily existence. Part of the plenary will be in Spanish (with English translation) because NMAC wants attendees to understand the challenges facing non-English speaking or English as a second language clients and staff.

The meeting starts on Monday, October 19th, at Noon (Eastern) or 9 AM (Pacific). An e-newsletter will go out that day at 10 AM (eastern)/7 AM (Pacific) with the conference URL and how to log onto the conference platform. You only need the email address that you used at registration. The conference platform will open at 11 AM (Eastern) with the Opening Plenary at Noon (Eastern)/9 AM (Pacific). The time zones can get a little tricky; however, sessions will be online for the next 12 months. NMAC will also host a webinar on Thursday, October 15th at 1 PM (Eastern) to familiarize attendees on the conference platform. Register here.

Get there early on Monday to explore the conference platform and to get a good seat at the Opening. The conference lobby sits at the intersection of Black Lives Matter Plaza in Washington, DC, and the John Lewis mural in Atlanta. The exhibit hall is in front of the fence at Lafayette Square where protesters have sent messages to the White House. The information desk is in front of the Breonna Taylor and Trayvon Martin murals. NMAC's goal is to show the HIV movement that we are part of the greater struggle for racial justice and health equity. Our work to end the epidemic must stand in solidarity with Black Lives Matter.

While this all sounds amazing, my real concern is “will the platform crash with close to 7,000 people online.” In other words, we also need your patience and understanding. Staff is working hard, but it will be a photo finish. Like everyone, we’ve had to pivot into the unknown. We don’t know what we don’t know, so we may be asking the wrong questions. Taking risks is the fuel that runs our movement. When HIV was discovered, we had no idea what to do. We only had each other and the hope that our friends would not die alone.

The 2020 Conference Program Book will go online this week. Please download it in advance of the meeting to figure out which sessions you want to attend live. If you miss a session, it will be online for the next 12 months. This year there are four plenaries. NMAC is hosting the Opening and Closing Plenaries. Gilead will put on a second plenary on Monday, October 19th. ViiV put together the Tuesday, October 20th plenary. NMAC thanks our sponsors for their support. It allows us to make the meeting free. It is important to understand that sponsors had no input into NMAC’s sessions, and we had no input into theirs. It is a difficult tightrope to walk between the need for resources to put on the meeting and the need to keep our voices independent of outside influence. It is particularly challenging for people of color who do not have the same access to money as our white counterparts.

Workshops will be prerecorded and live. The challenge will be the “live” question and answer portion with the workshop presenters. During this section, participants will hopefully be able to ask questions via the “chat” box. While most of us have been on zoom calls with 30 or 40 people, what happens when you have hundreds of attendees? There are 94 workshops and institutes. NMAC wants to thank all of the presenters who donated their time.

Millions of people are losing their jobs because of COVID-19. At the same time, the HIV movement is getting its first influx of new money to end the HIV epidemic. With all this need, it was easy to envision a Jobs Fair, but much more difficult to make it an integral part of this virtual meeting. Thankfully, we received announcements from 30 organizations to post during the conference. If you are looking for employment, please bring your resume and schedule information interviews with organizations who are hiring. NMAC’s goal is for our movement to hire people from the communities hardest hit by HIV.

Lounges are NMAC’s version of online affinity sessions. This year we invited community to put together lounges for like-minded groups to support people in the field and check-in with each other. COVID-19 has isolated too many people. As we know, this isolation can lead to depression. Look for a lounge for People Over 50 Living with HIV, a Transgender Lounge, a PWH Lounge, a Youth Lounge, and others. Lounges will be huge zoom check-in calls to see the faces and hear the voices of your colleagues. They might be a little messy, but that’s what makes them community.

The Closing Plenary on Wednesday, October 21st, is our Federal Plenary. Rather than having the same old talking heads with their PowerPoints, this year’s plenary has NMAC staff asking questions to our federal leaders. We are very thankful that our old friend Dr. Anthony Fauci has recorded a special plenary talk. With all his work on COVID-19, we were honored that he found time to address USCHA.

It’s going to be a very different United States Conference on HIV/AIDS. We are thankful that so many of you will be joining us from your computer screens around the country. I miss everyone, we will be together again…

Yours in the struggle,

Paul Kawata

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/uscha-home-stretch