USCHA Is On!

Despite the aftermath of Hurricane Fiona, the 2022 United States Conference on HIV/AIDS will still be held in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

September 26, 2022 By Paul Kawata

NMAC would never knowingly put constituents in danger. This picture was taken yesterday, Sunday, September 25th of Joey Pons (left, host committee co-chair) and Damián Cabrera (NMAC Treatment Manager) in front of the Puerto Rico Convention Center. Please watch their video messages here and here.

The decision about the future of the 2022 United States Conference on HIV/AIDS was made in consultation with the local host committee. They've spent years working to bring the meeting to their city. The Host Committee is sensible and emphatic with all the people affected by hurricane Fiona, particularly people living with HIV/AIDS and their families, communities and community-based HIV organizations and their workers. They believe that USCHA is part of the strategies for ending the HIV epidemic. They also believe the entire HIV community in Puerto Rico would greatly benefit from all that the conference entails and provides for exchange of strategies, ideas and experiences learned from struggles, such as this one. Additionally, people need to feel supported and cancelling the conference would send a very different message.

USCHA is the largest meeting to happen in San Juan since COVID. Since the airport, convention center, and our 10 hotels are ready and excited for us to arrive, NMAC and the host committee want to support the workers and bring economic development, even if it is modest compared to the need, during this difficult time. We understand some might not be ready to travel. NMAC will extend the registration refund deadline to October 1, 2022. However, we hope you will join us and support the San Juan community and the people living with HIV and their communities outside of the capital city.

A few constituents shared concerns about the optics of visitors going to PR while so many are suffering. The host committee said optics go both ways. No question, San Juan and Puerto Rico are hurting. Is it better to cancel and avoid those optics or bring the economic development that USCHA provides? The meeting will pull the curtain back so attendees can learn about the real San Juan. The region was in trouble before Fiona and the weather only exacerbated the inequities. According to The Atlantic, "approximately 43 percent of all Puerto Ricans live below the poverty line and struggle to find work. The median household income is $21,058, less than half the median income in Mississippi, the poorest American state."

We also understand that, once again, the world has changed. USCHA won't be the same meeting.

Here are some of the ways we are pivoting:

In the aftermath of Hurricane Fiona, it was important to also support HIV service organizations impacted by the storm, especially those on the west and south sides of the main island. Gilead has committed $500,000 to this effort. AIDS United will oversee the fund to help rebuild agencies in PR. Together, we will approach other HIV donors to rally support for nonprofit community-based HIV services.

Coaí, a local AIDS service organization, created a fund that directly supports people living with HIV who were impacted by Fiona. We are asking the HIV community, particularly people attending USCHA, to consider donating. NMAC will match the money raised by conference participants. Corporate money will help rebuild CBOs; community support will go directly to people living with HIV/AIDS.

If you are not going to USCHA, please consider making a donation via PayPal. This account is managed by Coaí. The money raised will support people living with HIV who were impacted by Fiona. Coaí will work with agencies across Puerto Rico to distribute the funds raised.

In addition to these changes, NMAC is looking for additional ways to help. We talked about a day of service, but local agencies said their real need is money. Someone suggested bringing canned food, but we were told the ports are open and supplies are not an issue. NMAC recommends speaking directly with the CBOs from those regions who will be at USCHA. One hundred scholarships, including hotel and per diem, were set aside for people in Puerto Rico. Many of the recipients are from the most impacted areas.

One of the biggest challenges to leadership is making the right decision when the pathway is not clear. NMAC will never put constituents in danger, but we also don’t shy away from a fight, especially when it’s a fight for community. The HIV movement is so much more then AIDS, Inc. We are a family that looks out for each other. While thoughts and prayers are nice, as you have read, locals need the jobs that USCHA supports. Local small businesses, particularly LGBTQ bars and restaurants, will also greatly benefit during USCHA. Attendees also need to be sensitive to the reality that this is a community in trauma. Now more than ever, we all need and deserve kindness. Please be respectful and not add to the trauma of living in the Caribbean.

Yours in the Struggle,

Paul Kawata

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