POLICY PRIORITIES FOR CONGRESS

During this time of uncertainty, we continue to advocate for our communities

AIDSWatch 2020 was supposed to be in person, like it has been for the last 25 years. But, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we gathered for the first virtual AIDSWatch in March 2020. We adjusted to the realities of COVID-19 and found new ways to connect and advocate for policies that affect our communities.

Six months later, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to challenge our public health system, the country continues to see overdue national unrest regarding racial injustice, and people in our communities continue to face economic, social, and health disparities. For this reason, we meet again with AIDSWatch: Road to Resiliency.

Thousands of HIV advocates from across the country have attended AIDSWatch in its 29-year history. Each of them has brought their voice and story to the halls of power in Washington, D.C.

We know that we cannot end the HIV epidemic if any community is left out or left behind. We need strong federal commitment and investment in strategies — based on science, not stigma — to end the HIV epidemic in all communities across the United States. And we will keep returning until we have succeeded in ending the HIV epidemic in this country.

HIV advocates have had to adapt many times throughout the epidemic’s history. New challenges in our world force us to adapt our techniques and rethink our strategies. We continue this tradition at AIDSWatch: Road to Resiliency by exploring how we sustain our advocacy around ending the HIV epidemic in the United States, amid the COVID-19 pandemic and with a focus on racial justice.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 1.2 million people are currently living with HIV in the United States, with 37,832 people newly diagnosed in 2018. Disparities are still seen in communities of color and among LGBTQ+ people even as new HIV diagnoses have been declining overall. The HIV epidemic is driven by factors that limit people’s ability to access and engage in health care, including racism, homophobia, transphobia, HIV stigma, poverty and more.

HIV impacts all of our communities. More than half the new HIV diagnoses occur in the South. Young people (ages 13-24) accounted for 21% new HIV diagnoses in 2018. And people aged 50 and older now account for more than half of all people living with HIV.
This is why we are connecting with you, our representatives and senators, to advocate for the policy changes outlined below. Each of us must do all that we can to ensure this country moves toward our goal of ending the HIV epidemic; these policy priorities are where Congress can start.

**RACIAL JUSTICE, CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM AND HEALTH JUSTICE**

The federal government must protect the civil rights of marginalized people and ensure the human rights of all people. The government — and the criminal justice system in particular — is failing in this duty, especially for Black, Indigenous and Latinx people.

These violations exacerbate disparities for people who live with HIV, especially since Black people and other people of color already bear a disproportionate burden of the epidemic. While criminal justice reform is not enough to bring about liberation from white supremacy, we also know that we cannot achieve racial justice without major shifts in our criminal justice and health care systems.

In 2018, 94 community-based organizations published a community-driven plan to end the HIV epidemic. To date, more than 250 national, state and local organizations have endorsed it. The plan called for significant, intersectional criminal justice reforms, including:

- Repealing laws that criminalize HIV and other infectious diseases.
- Decriminalizing sex work.
- Undoing the harassment and criminalization of immigrant communities.
- Minimizing criminal justice involvement for people who use drugs.
- Reducing mass incarceration.
- Eliminating both mandatory minimums for drug offenses and cash bail.
- Removing legal barriers to accessing public housing and other social benefits for individuals with past drug convictions.

To protect the rights and promote the health of all racial and ethnic groups, we urge Congress to:

- Ensure the full implementation of and building on the First Step Act of 2018 to reform both the adult and juvenile criminal justice system by focusing on: eliminating both private, for-profit prisons and racialized risk assessments, and working toward meaningful sentencing reform.
- Enact comprehensive immigration reform, and protect the due process of law for all immigrants detained by law enforcement or immigration authority, including the police, the U.S. Border Patrol, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and by not supporting punitive legislation aimed at sanctuary cities.
- Repeal the Trump administration’s changes to the Public Charge Rule and the Section 1557 rule (nondiscrimination protections in health programs and activities).
- Address the numerous ways communities of color, and specifically Black communities, have been disproportionately incarcerated and policed by punitive drug policies.
Oppose attacks on disability rights protections as part of any COVID-19 relief packages.

Make meaningful changes to policing standards and systems through bills such as H.R. 7085, the Ending Qualified Immunity Act and S. 3955, the Justice for Breonna Taylor Act.

Ending the HIV epidemic in the United States requires acknowledging, discussing and addressing the deep-seated and pervasive role racism and anti-Blackness plays in the country’s failure to achieve health equity, safety and fairness for all. These policy proposals will help make our communities safer and bring us closer to ending the HIV epidemic.

**FEDERAL APPROPRIATIONS**

**Labor, Health and Human Services departments fiscal year 2021 appropriations bill**

**A NEED FOR ATTENTION**

The Labor, Health and Human Services bill needs to ensure necessary levels of funding for advancing and improving HIV and AIDS programs plus an additional focus on minority populations, given the crucial issue of racial justice.

This current appropriations bill (H.R. 7614), as passed by the House, supports all areas of HIV/AIDS-related funding with necessary increases from their FY 2020 amounts. The bill also removes a ban on the use of federal funds to purchase syringes and other related supplies, a change long sought by harm reductionists and HIV advocates. Syringe service programs are providing lifesaving health care services to many who would not otherwise interact with health care institutions. Their work is even more important right now as people who use drugs are exposed to riskier conditions of use, heightened concerns of HIV acquisition and COVID-19 contraction, and increased severity of resultant illnesses. We call on Congress to pass this bill that will support federal funding for these lifesaving federal programs and allows health interventions to respond to the needs of their clients.

Members of Congress must remove any language restricting the use of federal funds to ensure that syringe services programs can continue to respond fully to the needs of their clients during this pandemic through their vital harm reduction work.
TAKE ACTION NOW

Funding USPS to support access to health care and civic engagement

Changes to the U.S. Postal Service are jeopardizing the upcoming election’s mail-by-vote procedures. However, these changes also jeopardize the value and convenience of getting prescriptions by mail.

Mail-order pharmacies allow people to receive medication in a timely, convenient manner. Mail delivery options have benefited people who are aging, people who live in rural areas, and people who have significant professional or family obligations. Mail delivery for medication must be protected.

Despite agreeing to temporarily suspend changes until after the November election, Postmaster General Louis DeJoy has stated that he will not reverse changes already in place, such as replacing removed sorting machines and mailboxes. These changes weaken our postal service and will continue to cause mail service delays. Postal Service delays have the potential to endanger the health and welfare of people who depend on the service to obtain medications necessary to manage chronic conditions.

The administration must listen to patients and care providers about the importance of ensuring the Postal Service reverses all changes made and improves the speed and reliability of mail. Congress must give the Postal Service the tools and funding necessary to adequately operate as they provide to those who need access to their medications. We encourage the Senate to pass H.R. 8015: The Delivering for America Act, to ensure that these live-saving functions of the Postal Service are maintained during the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 RESPONSE: SUPPLEMENTAL FUNDING AND EQUITY IN MEDICAL ADVANCEMENT RESEARCH

Supplemental funding to address the effects of COVID-19 — Leave no one behind

The $3 trillion HEROES Act to address COVID-19 has languished on Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell’s desk as the virus continues to spread throughout the country and our health care infrastructure grows increasingly overwhelmed. Members of Congress must act immediately to provide historically underserved communities, including those of us living with HIV, with the support and resources they desperately need to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.
Include people living with HIV in COVID-19 Vaccine Trials

The race to create a vaccine for the coronavirus is well underway. But in the race to find a vaccine, those of us living with HIV and at other intersections of oppression cannot be left behind. People living with, impacted by, and vulnerable to HIV must continue to fight so that all vaccine trials are truly representative of our communities, in terms of gender identity, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, immigration status, serostatus, socioeconomic class, and other aspects. All vaccine trials must include those of us living with and impacted by HIV, and particularly communities of color who bear disproportionate burden of both the COVID-19 and the HIV epidemics. Not to do so is dangerous and irresponsible. Members of Congress should demand that the Food and Drug Administration — and FDA Commissioner Stephen Hahn specifically — ensures that any COVID-19 vaccines are shown to be effective for all Americans, including those of us living with HIV and other all-too-often ignored populations.