

Opinion: The lessons of the fight against AIDS are vital today

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World AIDS Day, which we observe today, is our annual commemoration of the HIV pandemic, the deadliest public health crisis of the past 40 years. More than 75 million people have contracted HIV and the 36 million deaths from it have shattered the lives of individuals, families and communities.

The lessons of four decades of resilience in the fight against AIDS are vital to deploy amid the COVID pandemic and public health threats of the future. Nowhere has this resilience been more evident than in the action and activism of the LGBTQIA, African American and Latinx communities and their allies.

We learned in our response to HIV that there are universal, effective health care strategies that save lives. There is no silver bullet to treatment – we need a combination of strategies to prevail. Barriers, like face coverings or condoms, stop infectious diseases. Cleanliness, helped by sanitizers or soaps,

assures protection from viruses. Most importantly, we learned that behavior change takes time. Time in which resilience trumps fatigue. Time during which care for one's self and one another is paramount. These and other strategies have peeled us away from the horrific heights of the HIV pandemic. Collectively embracing them can also curtail COVID.

Relentless resilience in advocacy during the HIV epidemic brought forward critical changes to health care delivery. The nationally renowned patient-centered HIV Medical Home developed at Vivent Health is the template for caring for people with chronic or life-threatening disease. Our HIV Medical Home provides care for everyone in need, achieves some of the finest clinical quality outcomes in the world and saves the health care system millions of dollars a year. Our HIV Medical Home seeks to treat disease and confront the social determinants driving the HIV epidemic.

Much like HIV, COVID has laid bare the issue of health equity in our country. Like HIV, African American, Latinx and other racial communities are more likely to contract COVID than whites. Black lives must matter in our conversations about pervasive violence and in our creation of a health system that eliminates different outcomes for people based on their skin color, where they live, or who they love.

In a country that professes equality, our actions do not measure up. A study recently released by the CDC highlighted this disproportionate impact. We will not prevail against HIV unless we address injustice. The same must be said for overcoming COVID. Our national pandemic playbook must be built on health equity, economic equity, and social equity. There is no need to wait for the next virus to arrive; we can and should do this work now.

Early HIV advocacy teaches us about civil discourse amid a pandemic. Born out of the gay rights movement, our advocacy was relentless. We left no doubt what needed to be done. We were effective because we were unyielding in lifting the needs of people affected by HIV. We created a strong, bipartisan

response. Keep in mind when Joe Biden was vice president our first National HIV/AIDS Strategy was inked and during his presidency, Donald Trump highlighted ending the epidemic in successive State of the Union addresses, leading to a new investment to end HIV. This bipartisan commitment to COVID is what is sorely lacking today. Imagine the progress we would make if we depoliticized face coverings, supported physical distancing and worked together to end COVID.

As we recognize World AIDS Day it is vital to remember the people taken from us and the people who valiantly fight on. Let's honor their memory by applying the lessons from one of the darkest chapters of our public health history to prevent it from occurring again.

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