AIDS 2020 Will Be a Virtual Conference

In the face of the COVID-19 crisis, organizers say the health and safety of the HIV community is their highest priority.

March 27, 2020 By Liz Highleyman

Organizers of the 2020 International AIDS Conference announced today that in response to the ongoing coronavirus crisis, the in-person meeting that was to be held July 7 to 10 in San Francisco and Oakland will be replaced with a virtual conference.

“In light of the global COVID-19 pandemic and the need to ensure both the safety of our community and that frontline HIV and infectious diseases providers and innovators are available for the response, AIDS 2020 in San Francisco/Oakland will move to a virtual conference,” AIDS 2020 cochair Monica Gandhi, MD, MPH, of the University of California at San Francisco, told POZ. “AIDS 2020: Virtual will still be a fantastic meeting and will include sessions on COVID-19 and the attempts to define the relationship between HIV and COVID-19.”

As the pandemic continues to worsen, the United States is now being hit particularly hard. On March 26, the United States surpassed China as the country with the largest number of cumulative cases of COVID-19, the respiratory illness caused by the new coronavirus.

AIDS 2020 is just one of many conferences to be canceled, postponed or shifted to a virtual format in recent weeks. Earlier this month, the Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections was among the first to go virtual, with presentations given via webcast.

Organizers of HIV2020, a parallel conference in Mexico City organized by a coalition of advocates, community groups and people living with HIV who opposed holding AIDS 2020 in the United States, announced that they will also cancel their in-person meeting in favor of a virtual format.

AIDS 2020, sponsored by the International AIDS Society, was expected to draw upward of 20,000 participants from more than 170 countries. Organizers promise the virtual conference will still feature a full program of events.

“AIDS 2020: Virtual will enable delegates to access and engage with the latest HIV science, advocacy and knowledge traditionally presented at the conference,” Gandhi and cochairs Anton Pozniak, MD, of Chelsea and Westminster Hospital in London, and Cynthia Carey-Grant, the former executive director of Women Organized to Respond to Life-threatening Diseases, said in a statement. “It will be a compelling combination of virtual sessions and community networking

including exhibitions, workshops, the Global Village, satellites and pre-conferences that will reach audiences around the world."

The organizers acknowledge that much remains to be learned about how COVID-19 affects people living with HIV. While most experts think those on antiretroviral treatment with an undetectable viral load and a high CD4 count are not at increased risk for coronavirus infection, a substantial proportion of HIV-positive people have not achieved viral suppression. What's more, many are older and have coexisting health conditions that could make them more likely to develop serious illness.

"[W]e are acutely aware that there is not yet sufficient data on whether people living with HIV are more susceptible to COVID-19 or more likely to develop severe disease," the cochairs wrote. "Therefore, we have a special obligation to reduce any potential risk to the HIV community."

Furthermore, "many of those who were planning to attend are now working on the front lines in the response to COVID-19 around the world," the statement adds. "We have a responsibility to not put any of these individuals—or their home communities—at risk, nor redirect their efforts at a critical time in the response to the pandemic."

The organizers said that people who have registered for AIDS 2020 will be contacted directly with further information about a new reduced pricing structure, and details about the virtual program will be shared in the coming weeks.

"Our commitment to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing global health landscape and to persevere in the face of uncertainty is stronger than ever," the co-chairs concluded. "The theme of this year's conference is resilience, and there is no better word to describe the HIV community and our ability to come together in a shared commitment to the global HIV response."

For more information about the conference, visit AIDS 2020: Virtual.

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http://beta.docker.realhealthmag.com/article/aids-2020-will-virtual-conference