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Black HIV Advocates Meet DaBaby: “Call Him in Instead of Calling Him Out”

The rapper met with representatives from dozens of organizations who signed an open letter to the artist.

August 31, 2021

Today, Black leaders from nine HIV organizations across the U.S. announced they held a virtual, private meeting with artist Jonathan “DaBaby” Kirk to discuss HIV facts and share personal stories of living and thriving with HIV. The leaders called for a meeting with the artist in an open letter on August 4 to which DaBaby affirmatively responded. The organizations provide HIV education and direct services to people most impacted by HIV/AIDS, especially Black heterosexual men and women and LGBTQ communities across the southern United States, which account for the majority of new HIV cases. Last week, GLAAD also released findings from the 2021 State of HIV Stigma Study, funded by the Gilead COMPASS (COMmitment to Partnership in Addressing HIV/AIDS in Southern States) Initiative® which found only 42% of Americans know that people living with HIV cannot transmit the virus while on proper treatment.

On Wednesday, August 25, representatives from Black AIDS Institute, Gilead Sciences COMPASS Initiative Coordinating Centers, GLAAD, National Minority AIDS Council (NMAC), The Normal Anomaly Initiative, Positive Women’s Network-USA, Prevention Access Campaign (U=U), the Southern AIDS Coalition, and Transinclusive Group, as well as a faith and HIV advisor, discussed HIV history and education, as well as the groups’ work in Black, LGBTQ and faith communities.

This meeting followed the open letter to DaBaby from these and other organizations earlier this month which asked for a meeting after harmful and inaccurate comments at the Rolling Loud Festival in Miami. In the letter, the HIV advocates wrote: “At a time when HIV continues to disproportionately impact Black Americans and queer and transgender people of color, a dialogue is critical. We must address the miseducation about HIV expressed in your comments, and the impact it has on various communities.”

As of August 26th, 125 organizations signed on to support the open letter to DaBaby. Organizations signing the letter include the Gilead COMPASS Initiative Coordinating Centers at Emory University, the University of Houston, Southern AIDS Coalition, and Wake Forest University along with at least 44 COMPASS partners including Arkansas Black Gay Men Forum, Partnership To End AIDS Status Inc. (PEAS), My Brother’s Keeper, Inc., Relationships Unleashed, and Advocacy House Services. The Gilead COMPASS Initiative® is an unprecedented more than $100 million commitment over 10 years to support over 180 organizations working to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the Southern United States. COMPASS focuses on providing concentrated investments in the region to reduce HIV-related health disparities, build awareness, advance education, and reduce stigma.

Joint Statement from Black Community Leaders/Meeting Attendees:

The open letter to DaBaby was our way to extend him the same grace each of us would hope for. Our goal was to ‘call him in instead of calling him out.’ We believed that if he connected with Black leaders living with HIV that a space for community building and healing could be created. We are encouraged he swiftly answered our call and joined us in a meaningful dialogue and a thoughtful, educational meeting.

During our meeting, DaBaby was genuinely engaged, apologized for the inaccurate and hurtful comments he made about people living with HIV, and received our personal stories and the truth about HIV and its impact on Black and LGBTQ communities with deep respect. We appreciate that he openly and eagerly participated in this forum of Black people living with HIV, which provided him an opportunity to learn and to receive accurate information.

As community leaders who understand the power of conversations as a path to education and evolution, we know that DaBaby received meaningful facts. We were also able to share personal stories about our lives as everyday people who acquired HIV. Now, we wish for him to use his platform to relay that critical information to his fanbase and encourage people to get tested and know their status. During our meeting, DaBaby acknowledged that the HIV facts we presented — many of which he himself was unaware of — are what every American needs to know: HIV is preventable and when treated properly, cannot be passed on. At a time when HIV continues to disproportionately impact Black communities, celebrities and influencers of all backgrounds have the power to defeat the stigma that fuels the epidemic. We must all do our part to make the public aware of medication that can prevent HIV and to get more people tested and treated. Together we can end this epidemic. 40 years is far too long. Stigma hurts; prevention, testing, and treatment work.

Leaders shared the following facts with DaBaby and jointly want to share them with his fans:

1. HIV Is a Social Justice and Racial Justice Issue: Black Americans account for more HIV diagnoses (43%) and people living with HIV (42%) than any other racial and ethnic group in the U.S. Black Americans are vulnerable to HIV because of structural barriers, steeped in racist and anti-Black policies and practices, to resources like healthcare, education, employment and housing. The three groups most affected by HIV are Black gay men, Black cisgender women and transgender women of color.
2. HIV Treatment Works, U=U: People diagnosed with HIV don’t “die in two or three weeks.” People living with HIV, when on effective treatment, live long and healthy lives and cannot sexually transmit HIV. When someone living with HIV receives effective treatment and follows regimens prescribed by their doctor, HIV becomes undetectable when tested. When HIV is undetectable, it is untransmittable: U=U (#UequalsU)
3. HIV Prevention Works: HIV testing should be a part of regular medical screenings.The CDC

recommends that every person ages 13-64 receive an HIV test. When a person takes a test and receives an HIV diagnosis, they can be linked to care immediately to protect their own health and prevent passing on HIV to others. When a person takes a test and learns they are HIV negative, they can then make decisions that can protect them from HIV. Medications like PrEP (a daily pill to prevent HIV) are 99% effective at preventing HIV when taken as prescribed for people who do not have HIV.

4. HIV Is a Chronic Health Condition, Not a Death Sentence: HIV can be prevented, tested, and treated like any chronic disease such as diabetes. It is not a death sentence. People living with HIV and on treatment can be healthy, have children, and not pass on the virus (Undetectable = Untransmittable).
5. HIV Stigma Hurts, and Spreads the Disease: Shaming people living with HIV or for being on medication to prevent HIV stops people from seeking the care they need and lets undiagnosed people pass on the virus.

The 2021 State of HIV Stigma Study, published last week by GLAAD and Gilead Sciences, paints a troubling picture of the general US population's overall awareness about HIV, including low levels of accurate knowledge around HIV transmission, and persistent stigma toward people living with HIV.

- 48% of American adults feel knowledgeable about HIV, down 3 points from the last year
- 87% believe there is still stigma around HIV
- Only 42% know the fact that people living with HIV cannot transmit the virus while on proper treatment
- 53% of non-LGBTQ people surveyed noted they would be uncomfortable interacting with a medical professional who has HIV; 43% uncomfortable around a hair stylist or barber living with HIV, 35% with a teacher living with HIV
- Levels of discomfort around people living with HIV are higher in the Midwest and highest in the U.S. South

From the 2021 State of HIV StigmaGLAAD

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Quote from Marnina Miller, a Community Outreach Coordinator with the Southern AIDS Coalition, a Gilead COMPASS Initiative Coordinating Center, who participated in the meeting:

“DaBaby’s willingness to listen, learn, and grow can open the door to an entirely new generation of people to do the same. We are proud to be part of the Gilead COMPASS Initiative’s efforts to train nearly 13,000 people to become more effective leaders and advocates within the HIV community across the South and hope that each can have impactful conversations just like ours with DaBaby. Ending HIV stigma requires doing the hard work of changing hearts and minds, and often that begins with something as simple as starting a dialogue. We hope DaBaby will use his platform to educate his fans and help end the epidemic.”

Quote from DaShawn Usher, Associate Director, Communities of Color, GLAAD:

“For the second year in a row, we are finding that HIV stigma remains high while HIV knowledge remains low amongst Americans. We have to think critically and intentionally about how we truly equip and engage everyday Americans with the facts, resources, and scientific advancements about HIV if we want to end the epidemic. We must hold the media accountable to the 1.2 million Americans living with HIV who are not seen, represented, or discussed. Their stories matter and are beyond worthy of being told.”

Quote from Reverend Rob Newells-Newton, Director of Programs, Black AIDS Institute

“Our goal is to make sure that Black people are armed with accurate information so that they can make the best choices for themselves about their sexual health. Last year, Black AIDS Institute released We The People: A Black Strategy to End HIV. This year, we’ve been working with our partners to develop a Federal Action Plan and a Community Action Plan with concrete steps folks can take to put the four pillars of We The People into action. We call on Black people and our allies to: dismantle anti-Black racism; invest in transforming the socioeconomic conditions of Black people; ensure universal access to culturally-affirming healthcare; and build the capacity and motivation of Black communities to be the change agents for ending HIV.”

This press release was originally published at GLAAD.org.
