CBS Fires Reporter Who Stoked Fears of an “HIV ATTACK”

The incident prompted New York activists to rally against HIV stigma and for bail reform.

January 10, 2020 By Trent Straube

CBS New York said it fired a reporter who promoted fear-based misinformation about HIV in an article and related tweets. The article detailed the arrest of an HIV-positive man who allegedly spit in the mouth of a police officer; the reporting incorrectly implied the officer was in danger of contracting the virus. HIV is not transmitted by saliva.

The arrest led HIV advocates to rally outside CBS headquarters Friday, January 10, to stop HIV stigma and criminalization and to support bail reform efforts in New York. (Updated bail laws took effect in the state January 1. More on that below.)

> We are here demanding accountability from CBS and Port Authority PD for using HIV stigma as fuel for rollbacks on bail reform. #StigmaNOBailReformYES pic.twitter.com/DeZo25MKgJ
>
> — ACT UP NY (@actupny) January 10, 2020

“This online story should not have been published,” wrote CBS New York in a written statement to Gay City News. “It does not meet our journalistic standards, nor does it reflect our core values. The person who wrote and published the story and social media post failed to review the copy with our news managers. This individual is no longer employed by CBS New York.”

The original incident involves a man who was arrested on suspicion of stealing yogurt at LaGuardia airport on Monday, January 6. He allegedly spit on a Port Authority police officer while in custody at LaGuardia. A judge decided to release him.

“Stigma No!

Bail Reform Yes!”

AIDS activists march to @CBSNewYork demanding accountability for their recently stigmatizing and fearmongering article on people living with HIV@GMHC @VOCALNewYork @actupny pic.twitter.com/GnjuERt5M9

— Jason L. Walker (@LamarWalks11) January 10, 2020

When CBS New York covered the incident, it included details from the Port Authority Police Benevolent Association stating that the suspect was HIV positive and spit in an officer’s mouth. This implied that there was a risk of transmission, when the fact is that HIV is not spread through saliva.

The situation was further inflamed, according to Gay City News, when CBS New York promoted its story in a tweet that read: “RELEASED AFTER HIV ATTACK: A judge has let a suspect back onto the streets after police at LaGuardia say the attacker spit into an officer’s mouth knowing they had HIV—sparking more outrage at another bail reform controversy.”

I learned that HIV couldn’t be transmitted through saliva in seventh grade health class in bumblefuck New Jersey. Stop attempting to undermine bail reform with stigma and lies.

— Hilarie Ashton (@HilarieAshton) January 9, 2020

HIV advocacy groups across the city, including Housing Works, ACT UP New York and VOCAL-NY,

urged CBS to correct its salacious and misleading report. CBS deleted the tweets and removed HIV references from the article. CBS New York later confirmed to Gay City News that it had fired the reporter.

In a press release for the rally, Housing Works noted that during the arrest, “no physical injuries to the police officer were described and no weapons were described. The person being arrested was charged with criminal mischief and assault in the second degree, which can refer to assault with a deadly weapon or assault with ‘intent to cause serious injury to someone.’ HIV groups are making inquiries to the Queens district attorney to determine if this is an HIV criminalization prosecution in which someone’s HIV status is being used to increase charges, despite no risk of transmission.”

We appreciate the statement, @CBSNewYork. But we want:

* an apology

* removal of the story

* staff training on destigmatizing HIV, AIDS and cash bail reform

* an explanation of why you think @PAPD911 is a reputable source

See you tomorrow. @VOCALNewYork @actupny @GMHC https://t.co/zomWG9idgS

— Housing Works (@housingworks) January 10, 2020

Sean Strub, who founded POZ, spoke with Gay City News: “It is a disappointing reality that HIV stigma is alive and well. But when HIV stigma is perpetuated by law enforcement leadership…it is not only disappointing and irresponsible, but dangerous. Just as bad was the CBS stations’ tweet headline referring to an ‘HIV attack.’ That newsroom needs some serious remedial education, starting with a basic science course about what the actual routes and risks of HIV transmission [are].”

.@housingworks @CBSNewYork use of the term “HIV attack,” even though retracted, in the context implying saliva as a potential mechanism for transmitting HIV is bad science and false. The media has a responsibility not to propagate stigma and unwarranted fear.

— Demetre Daskalakis (@DrDemetre) January 10, 2020

Activists brought up two other issues in relation to the arrest and the subsequent reporting. First is the fact that police released the HIV status of the suspect to the reporter in the first place. Second is that this incident unfolded just days after New York’s new bail laws took effect.

As part of a criminal justice reform effort, New York lawmakers recently eliminated cash bail and pretrial detention for most non-violent crimes, meaning that people charged with crimes don’t have to pay a cash bail to get released before their trial. The new bail law went into effect January 1. It was needed, advocates claim, because cash bail systems disproportionately affect Black and brown populations and criminalize poverty. For more details, see this explainer by the Brennan Center for Justice.

The cash bail reforms in New York remain controversial, and HIV activists claim that law enforcement and some media promote sensationalistic stories like the “HIV ATTACK” to scare the public into supporting efforts to roll back reforms.

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