To End HIV, We Must First Fight Fear and Stigma

Recent comments made by the rapper DaBaby highlight how much more work still needs to be done.

August 26, 2021 By Vrushabh Shah and Torrian L. Baskerville

During his performance at the Rolling Loud Music Festival in Miami, rapper DaBaby made harmful and homophobic comments that included false information about people living with HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. The incident received worldwide media coverage and was a sad reminder that HIV stigma is still prevalent today. While we've come far in the past 40 years since the first cases of HIV/AIDS were reported, the incident shows how easily stigma is perpetuated, and most devastatingly, adds shame to communities already burdened with the highest rates of infection — forcing many to suffer in silence, avoid getting tested, and stay out of life-saving care. HIV is no joking matter. We must fight fear and stigma to save lives.

Today, the LGBTQ media advocacy organization GLAAD is out with data to measure HIV stigma and how it can be defeated with increased representation and visibility in the media. GLAAD's 2021 HIV Stigma Study shows 87% of Americans believe there is still a stigma attached to HIV, with over half of non-LGBTQ people expressing unnecessary fear around medical professionals living with HIV. Just two-thirds are aware that medications exist to prevent HIV, and only 42% know that properly treating HIV means it cannot be transmitted. In its report, GLAAD urges news and entertainment media to increase its stories of and about people living long, full and healthy lives with HIV and include the basic facts about prevention and treatment across all platforms. This work can also be carried by all of us, state by state, community by community.

By using innovative, sex-positive, and identity-affirming programming, a wide range of organizations are intentionally combatting HIV stigma. Groups like He Is Valuable, based in Atlanta, utilizes non-traditional marketing strategies involving racy imagery as a means of normalizing intimacy where one partner is living with HIV and the other is not, reinforcing the message that HIV, when treated properly, is untransmittable. Mobilizing Our Brothers Initiative, based in New York City, leads with their out-of-the-box, holistic, and status-neutral approach to community engagement and programming. My Sistah's House in Memphis organizes grassroots campaigns to house trans women of color that center on sustainability and security. State health departments have also engaged in this work, with programs such as the Alabama Department Public Health's "Start Talking Alabama" stigma reduction and HIV awareness social media campaign that utilizes YouTube, Instagram, Twitter and Facebook.

At the heart of these strategies is a commitment to reach people “where they are.” A one-size-fits-all approach of stigma reduction has never worked for the communities most impacted by the virus, and in the South it has been counterproductive to ending the epidemic. Over the past decade, we’ve seen organizations embrace the powerful role of centering folks living with HIV as messengers of care in the community. They’ve changed hearts and minds as examples of what it means to live out loud. We’ve seen the multidisciplinary involvement of religious, community, medical, cultural and political leaders shift the conversation away from shame and towards resiliency.

Numerous health departments and community-based organizations across the South have intentionally prioritized competency trainings for their staff and leadership, so the folks in charge of protecting the public’s health never contribute to a culture of shame. From digital outreach to pride events to family cookouts, our community has demonstrated time and time again that stigma is never baked in. We have the tools, resources, and person-power to completely dismantle it and bring a faster end to this epidemic. All that’s left is the will to see it through and a commitment to honor every life impacted by this virus.

We owe it to the countless Black and Brown LGBTQ+ leaders in the Southern United States, who tirelessly organize to build a compassionate and safe world for our community, free of HIV. More importantly, we owe it to the over 1.1 million Americans living with HIV who deserve the decency and respect to live without physical, mental, or emotional harm. We must move forward with loving accountability to heal from the pain with one voice in compassion and love.

Let’s be clear: DaBaby must begin acknowledging the hurt he caused and actively take apart his perpetuation of HIV stigma. He can begin by sitting down with HIV organizations, including us at NASTAD, who are working daily to eliminate stigma and end the HIV epidemic. Our cause is rooted in healing justice, community care, and building a world where people living with HIV can thrive unapologetically. We call on DaBaby and the entertainment industry at large to join us. Every voice and every hand can make a difference, and there’s no time left to waste in our fight to end this epidemic.

About NASTAD

NASTAD is a leading nonpartisan nonprofit association that represents public health officials who administer HIV and hepatitis programs in the United States. Our singular mission is to end the intersecting epidemics of HIV, viral hepatitis and related conditions. We do this work by strengthening governmental public health through advocacy, capacity building and social justice.

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