How HIV/AIDS Groups Responded to Trump's State of the Union Address

A roundup of statements

February 6, 2019 By Trent Straube

Yes, Trump mentioned HIV/AIDS in his State of the Union address Tuesday night, February 5. As we reported on Monday, he was expected to unveil a plan to end HIV in America by 2030. Although his delivered remarks did not include mention of a specific HIV strategy, the topic ignited responses from numerous organizations that specialize in the epidemic. We've rounded up snippets from and links to those statements below.

But first, let's look at Trump's actual words. The subject of HIV came up in two paragraphs of his speech. You can read the entire transcript here, but the relevant section reads:

> We should also require drug companies, insurance companies and hospitals to disclose real prices to foster competition and bring costs way down. No force in history has done more to advance the human condition than American freedom. In recent years we have made remarkable progress in the fight against HIV and AIDS. Scientific breakthroughs have brought a once distant dream within reach.
>
> My budget will ask Democrats and Republicans to make the needed commitment to eliminate the HIV, epidemic in the United States within 10 years. We have made incredible strides, incredible. Together we will defeat AIDS in America and beyond. Tonight I am also asking you to join me in another fight that all Americans can get behind, the fight against childhood cancer.

More details about the president's HIV initiative, however, did materialize in a blog post by Alex Azar, secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, which you can read here.

And now the responses. Let's start off with a joint statement from 22 HIV/AIDS groups. In short, the statement urges Trump to honor the commitment to HIV transmissions by 2030 by expanding health care access, valuing the dignity and rights of vulnerable populations (LGBT community, people of color, immigrants) and withdrawing the planned changes to Medicare Part D (which would remove protections that make HIV meds affordable and accessible). You can read the full statement and the list of cosigners on the AIDS United POZ blog here.

The AIDS Institute, a national nonprofit, applauds Trump's "bold initiative" to end HIV in the country and urges Congress to support it. "His proposal to increase access to antiretroviral medications for people living with HIV and for prevention in those communities with the highest rates of HIV and where additional resources are most needed will translate into fewer HIV infections. Under the president's proposal, the number of new infections can eventually be reduced to zero," said Carl Schmid, the deputy executive director of the AIDS Institute. It must be noted, though, that Schmid was recently appointed as cochair of the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS (PACHA), a group whose members had either resigned in protest over Trump or, as of December 2017, had been fired by him. Besides Schmid and cochair John Wiesman, no other members have been announced.

Other groups were less enthusiastic about Trump's speech. Health Gap, an international advocacy organization, said Trump's plan was "only realistic with sweeping changes.... to end the HIV epidemics at home and globally, a real leader must call for: at least $1 billion in additional funding for global AIDS for fiscal year 2020, a permanent repeal of the Global Gag Rule, Medicare for All to ensure access to quality health care in the United States, evidence-based policies such as harm reduction for people who use drugs, and truly progressive proposals to slash the cost of medicines in the U.S. and globally."

That sentiment was echoed by local community organizations, such as the Alliance for Positive Change, which helps New Yorkers with HIV and other chronic illnesses and issues such as addiction. "In order to end the AIDS epidemic, the Trump Administration must preserve—not threaten to cut—Medicaid, upon which 40 percent of people living with HIV rely for health care.... We hope to see significant support for evidence-based interventions to mitigate the spread of HIV in the federal budget, which will be released "

Most organizations responding to the State of the Union speech stressed that ending HIV is impossible with an administration that undermines health care access, cuts HIV funding and research, and attacks the human rights and dignity of people disproportionately affected by HIV. As Blossom Brown, an activist and transgender woman living with HIV, summed up in a Human Rights Campaign statement: "No real public health agenda can ever include dangerous cuts or discrimination against those who need services the most."

The International Association of Providers of AIDS Care (IAPAC) underscored another challenge to ending the epidemic: "Among the barriers...are persistent HIV-related stigma and discrimination...parallel mental health and substance use epidemics and housing instability."

Meanwhile, the Act Now: End AIDS coalition called Trump's 10-year plan "underwhelming"—because, in fact, the epidemic could be brought to an end in five years! The coalition of over 250 community-led groups released a plan last World AIDS Day, December 1, outlining steps to end the U.S. epidemic by 2025. "Extensive community expertise has already been captured in the existing road map," noted coalition member Charles King, the CEO of Housing works. "We need to make it clear that this new federal plan cannot just pick and choose the recommendations that are most convenient to this current administration. If we want to end

this epidemic for every community in America, every single community recommendation contained in this document must be addressed."

To read more about the coalition's road map—and to download its report—click here.

And if all this talk about ending the epidemic inspires you to take action, check out these free lessons about successful HIV advocacy created by Positive Women's Network–USA. The lessons include videos and graphics that explain the workings of government—such as how a bill becomes a law and how the federal appropriations committees create budgets. To learn more about the "Claim Your Seat at the Table!" guide, click here.

For an op-ed about the State of the Union speech by Charles Lyons, president and CEO of the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation, click here.

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