

HIV/AIDS isn't over; why are GOP lawmakers pulling resources?



Your Turn
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Guest columnist

Republican officials are disrupting critical efforts to treat and prevent HIV/AIDS at the national and state levels. They are cutting funding and weakening prevention and treatment efforts that benefit communities that experience disproportionate HIV risk and lower access to HIV care.

These actions are cynical and proxies to the larger Republican strategy of weaponizing social issues to unify conservative voters while undermining effective and proven public health strategies and harming groups that have been historically marginalized.

The attacks are dangerous and may not stop soon.

Still no cure or vaccine for HIV but treatment has gotten better

There is still no cure or vaccine for HIV. However, interventions such as anti-retroviral treatment and preexposure prophylaxis (PrEP) have changed the HIV/AIDS care landscape, playing critical roles in the fight to end the pandemic.

In 2016 alone, anti-retroviral treatment prevented 1.2 million deaths globally.

Yet, despite the incredible progress in treatment and prevention, the pandemic still disproportionately harms people who have been economically and socially marginalized.

AIDS-related illnesses kill nearly 1 million people each year.

Of the 1.2 million people in the United States living with HIV, nearly 75% are nonwhite, with Black people accounting for 40% of new HIV diagnoses annually.

In addition, LGBTQ+ communities, people of color, people experiencing homelessness and those who inject drugs are all disproportionately impacted by HIV. Social and structural issues, discrimination, poverty and limited access to high-quality health care are top contributors to these disparities.

Republicans are pulling critical resources that help prevent HIV

With the crisis still underway, Repub-

licans are pulling critical resources. Two recent incidents typify their attack.

In March, a Republican-appointed federal judge struck down a requirement under the Affordable Care Act that covered preventive health services at no cost to patients, including PrEP access (the HIV prevention drug).

The judge stated that mandated PrEP coverage violates employers' religious beliefs by "making them complicit in facilitating homosexual behavior, drug use, and sexual activity outside of marriage between one man and one woman."

Earlier this year, Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee shockingly rejected nearly \$9 million in federal funding for HIV prevention – despite Tennessee having some of the highest rates of new infections nationally.

Republican-led attacks are prolonging a preventable crisis

Kentuckians who aspire to have equitable, just and safe communities should be alarmed. We need to name these attacks for what they are. We must organize and advocate to protect and increase the public health resources that serve us all and safeguard people struggling against marginalization.

Republican-led attacks are going to make people die faster and prolong a preventable public health crisis. Similar actions would be devastating in a state like Kentucky, which is sorely under-resourced.

We have access to miraculous medications that could end this crisis and evidence that good state-level policies are effective (New York and California).

Please raise the alarm now in your community: There are new threats to HIV treatment and prevention. Engage your local advocacy groups. Contact your legislator and voice your commitment to HIV treatment and prevention. Demand that our elected officials ensure funding for health care efforts foundational to the well-being of all Kentuckians.

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