



## **AIDS 2020: A Historic Conference at a Historic Time** ***HIV collided with COVID-19 for an unprecedented virtual meeting***

By Tamara E. Holmes

Every biennial International AIDS Conference has its own flavor, but AIDS 2020 will be remembered as the year that three worldwide crises converged.

“These are remarkable times and defining times,” [Anton Pozniak](#), AIDS 2020 International Chair, said during his opening address at the 23rd International AIDS Conference, also known as AIDS 2020: Virtual. “Every conversation we have now sits at the confluence of the COVID-19 pandemic and a new global reckoning with systemic racism.”

Originally scheduled July 6 to 10 in San Francisco and Oakland, California, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted organizers to move thousands of attendees to an online platform. [Resilience](#), the conference theme, reflects the HIV community’s longtime persistent efforts to end the HIV/AIDS epidemic while underscoring the new reality of social distancing and virtual conferencing amid the novel coronavirus.

Throughout the week, panelists, presenters and attendees grappled with the question: How do we frame HIV/AIDS in this moment when COVID-19 has absorbed the world’s attention and historic anti-racist activism has been ignited globally?

“It’s our job to make sure HIV remains part of this conversation and to connect the dots between conversations,” Pozniak said. “Our challenges are linked and so are our solutions.”

### **Adapting to a virtual experience**

Conference organizers made an effort to make the virtual experience as familiar to regular attendees as possible.

After logging in, attendees found themselves in a virtual lobby – which served as a conference dashboard – where they could see how many delegates were using the platform at that moment and how many were in their same online location.

In effect, the lobby was every user’s Conference control center. From there, attendees could enter the auditorium to access sessions and panels; interact with sponsors by



visiting exhibitors' booths; stop by the Help Desk for technical support; chat with activists in the Activist Lounge, or watch a webinar or performance in the Global Village.

While some of the camaraderie that characterizes International AIDS Conferences was lost to a virtual portal, attendees still could do some networking by clicking a chat button in another attendee's profile to draw them into an online conversation.

Having access to on-demand video presentations and 24-hour programming allowed for flexible conference viewing, but overall, the online experience was yet another constant reminder of the global public health emergency overshadowing the Conference.

### **Acknowledging a familiar theme**

The COVID-19 crisis brings up familiar themes to Black people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA), noted [Carmen Villar](#), Merck's vice president of Social Innovation.

"COVID-19 has magnified the racial and health disparities that the HIV community has known and navigated for decades," Villar said during the panel discussion entitled "The Great Magnifier: COVID-19, HIV, and Disparities on the Path to Health Equity."

Gregorio Millett, [vice president and director of public policy at amfAR](#), The Foundation for AIDS Research, shared data showing that social determinants such as employment status, lack of health insurance and housing contribute to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 among Black Americans.

Raniyah Copeland, president and chief executive officer of the Black AIDS Institute, pointed out that those are some of the same factors fueling HIV/AIDS in the Black community.

Throughout AIDS 2020, the conclusions for Black America became clear: Progress would be made in protecting the community from both viruses – HIV and COVID-19 – by addressing how systemic racism impacts public health.

### **Embracing new research and breakthroughs**

Despite concerns about how the COVID-19 pandemic might influence the fight against HIV, new research provided reassurance that progress is being made. Among the more notable research announced at the conference:

- The [first report of an adult](#) with HIV to achieve long-term HIV remission without a bone marrow transplant was released at AIDS 2020. Dr. Ricardo Diaz of the



University of São Paulo reported on a Brazilian man who received a 48-week regimen of the drugs maraviroc, dolutegravir and nicotinamide – in addition to his usual three-drug antiretroviral therapy (ART) – before maintaining HIV remission for 57 weeks without daily ART. While the news is promising, [researchers point out that the findings are preliminary](#) and more analysis must be completed before anyone can state definitively that the study participant is cured.

- Studies continue to show the effectiveness of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). The [SEARCH study](#) taking place in Kenya and Uganda found HIV infections 79% lower among people who started PrEP between June 2016 and April 2019 than the control group tested between 2015 and 2017 when PrEP was less available. Also, only 0.35% of study participants who initiated PrEP were diagnosed with HIV compared to 1.42% of those who had not.
- Also, PrEP may no longer require daily use. [Research](#) released by Dr. Raphael J. Landovitz of the UCLA Center for Clinical AIDS Research & Education showed that a PrEP regimen consisting of a long-acting form of the HIV drug cabotegravir was found to be more effective at preventing HIV than the daily oral drug Truvada for gay men, bisexual men, and transgender women. Those findings could pave the way for PrEP to be administered via an injection every two months rather than as a daily oral treatment, which may be easier for some to maintain. A companion study is currently underway among cisgender women in seven sub-Saharan African countries.

## **Propelling the movement to the future**

So where does the movement go from here?

Dr. [Monica Gandhi](#), local AIDS 2020 co-chair for San Francisco, and [Cynthia Carey-Grant](#), local AIDS 2020 co-chair for Oakland, provided their perspectives as the Conference concluded.

The current global spotlight on racism and inequality will inform our ability to work together in cooperation on viral pandemics, said Gandhi, an infectious disease physician, and HIV researcher.

“Because HIV and COVID-19 can only be conquered when we overcome stigma and discrimination, we will solve both pandemics when people and countries cooperate to address challenges that, like viruses, know no borders,” she said.

AIDS 2020 also underscored that finally eradicating HIV cannot exist in a vacuum.



“More than ever, it is vital to connect our movement and our conversations to the wider global debates around disparities, racism, and inequalities,” said Carey-Grant, a health activist who expedited her retirement in 2018 as executive director of the Oakland-based Women Organized to Respond to Life-threatening Diseases (WORLD) to prepare for her AIDS 2020 leadership role. “We cannot tackle HIV on its own without addressing these issues and rooting them out.”