

Let's renew our pledge to defeat HIV/AIDS

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We will stand together for as long as it takes until HIV/AIDS is no more, promoting enlightenment, dignity, acceptance, understanding and love; demonstrating that we are not only enduring this epidemic, but also prevailing over it.

That's the vision of Triad Health Project. We, along with our capable colleagues, have been doing this work for longer than any of us would like to think about.

Fortunately, our ability to respond to the epidemic of HIV/AIDS has improved in 33 years. In the early years when our friend and long-time colleague, Dr. Tim Lane, was treating a rare form of pneumonia usually limited to gay men with failed immune systems, there was little to offer other than comfort. Most folks who received an AIDS diagnosis were advised to get their affairs in order.

Gratefully, the advent of potent antiretroviral therapy has led to dramatic declines in deaths from AIDS and turned HIV into a chronic, manageable condition.

What hasn't changed? Stigma and ho-



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Fight

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mophobia — far too prevalent in every community — continue to keep many from hearing prevention messages, seeking HIV testing and, when necessary, treatment. Still, there may be some reason for hope in North Carolina. We recently celebrated marriage equality. What an affirming message — your committed relationship is equal under the law. Recently, Elton John, recording artist and founder of the Elton John AIDS Foundation, upped the ante for those of us who are proponents of marriage equality when he wrote in a New York Times op-ed piece:

“We need the same coalition that brought about marriage equality — from gay activists, human rights champions and social justice advocates to legal experts and courageous policy makers — to address the spiraling AIDS crisis again.”

He quoted some humbling statistics from new research by the Kaiser Family Foundation. For example, the foundation said that one in eight gay men in the United States is HIV positive, and yet a majority of gay and bisexual men say they are “not concerned” about HIV. And AIDS is among the leading causes of death for African American men.

Just a third of the men surveyed even knew that HIV infections were increasing in the United States. Thirty percent said they had never been tested, and a majority reported that they hadn't been tested in the last year, going against recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Our African American communities continue to be devastated by HIV. According to the CDC, blacks represent approximately 14 percent of the U.S. population, but account for almost half of people living with HIV in the United States (46 percent) and nearly half of new infections each year (45 percent). The rate of new HIV infection for black men is six times as high as that of white men, nearly three times that of Hispanic men and more than twice that of black women.

Triad Health Project and Cone Health Foundation staunchly support equal rights and access to health care for all people, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation or economic status. Stigma and homophobia fuel the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

The right to marriage guarantees smoother access to health care through partners' benefits, and the more profound long-term change could be in the gradual reduction of LGBT stigma. Reducing stigma and homophobia is not just about human rights and social justice. It is sound public health policy.

The communities most affected by HIV have been a powerful force behind the country's response to HIV/AIDS. In the early days of the epidemic, the gay community demanded information, research and resources that have had a major impact. That groundswell of activity and commitment needs renewing. Join us.