
The 22-year War of the Ribbons Drudges On

This October, the war in Maryland against HIV and AIDS (the disease that it causes), entered its 23rd year of battle. Casualties counted, projections made, the end remains out of sight.

By Vic Basile
Executive Director

In October of 1981, the unidentified and mysterious illness that was killing gay men in New York and San Francisco appeared for the first time in Maryland in a Prince George's County gay man. He was the first face of more than 40,000 people in our state who would contract HIV over the next 22 years. More than 14,000 have died since.

A second case of AIDS was reported in Baltimore City in December of 1981—this time an injection drug user—and the epidemic had begun. According to the Maryland AIDS Administration report, *Maryland's First 20,000 AIDS Cases*, "The cumulative number of [AIDS] cases grew rapidly, doubling and sometimes tripling each year through the 1980's, reaching 4,000 cases in 1990."

The rate of increase slowed in the early 1990's, but not significantly. Maryland added more than 1,000 cases to its books every year, until reaching the 10,000 mark in 1994. Tragically, on Friday, November 19th, 1999, Maryland's 20,000th case was reported. Yet despite the seriousness of the illness and the vast number of individuals affected, AIDS has never received the public attention and prevention effort that such a deadly epidemic warrants.

By comparison, Maryland saw 590 deaths resulting from alcohol-related motor vehicle accidents in 1999. In response, the government peppered the airwaves with public service announcements, as it had since the 80's, warning about the dangers of drinking and driving. TV commercials showed a state trooper giving a sobriety test to a drunk driver before locking him in the back of the cruiser.

That same year nearly 750 people died from AIDS, 1,804 acquired the infection of HIV, and 1,518 progressed from HIV+ to full-blown AIDS—yet there was no comparable public awareness campaign. Indeed, there has never been a large-scale, sustained awareness and prevention campaign to protect citizens from the disease. Efforts that once existed have largely waned since the introduction of better drug therapies and the media's loss of interest in covering the spread of the disease.

Today, most education and prevention programs are conducted by nonprofits or found in health education classes where, sadly, some teachers must constantly weigh their job security against talking about the use of condoms to prevent transmission. And were it not for a handful of politicians, such as Mayor Martin O'Malley and Delegate Maggie McIntosh, powerful supporters of Moveable Feast, the problem could well go ignored by our government.

The tragic result has been that the HIV and AIDS epidemic in Baltimore City and the State of Maryland is running out of control. To make matters worse, State funding to provide services to people with HIV/AIDS is being cut. As I write this, a letter arrived from the Maryland Department of Human Resources informing us that our grant to feed people on the Eastern Shore is being cut by 10%. While the epidemic grows, funding to combat it is being reduced.

Nonprofits such as Moveable Feast are being stretched to the limit at a time when the need for our services is greater than ever, services that help people with AIDS and their families live longer, healthier lives. And the outlook for a quick turn around is bleak. These are tough political and economic times—times that do not bode well for the sickest and most vulnerable among us.

Instead of leading the war against AIDS, nonprofits are instead forced to shift their focus towards maintaining current levels of service, rather than growing to meet the ever-increasing need. We must find ways to rise to this ominous challenge, but without greater support, the challenge might be insurmountable.

We are all hoping for something miraculous or Herculean: a cure for the infection, a gold mine's difference in funding increases, or an AIDS activist in the form of a media giant who will sound the clarion call for greater awareness and support. Lives hang in the balance.

So like Washington's battered troops during the frigid winter battles of the Revolutionary War, we will fight our hardest to prevail until help arrives.