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Steve Wakefield

External Relations Director, HIV Vaccine Trials Network (HVTN)

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Why National Gay Men's HIV/AIDS Awareness Day Still Matters

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HIV negative Black Gay Health Advocate does not sound like a business title. If anything, it sounds like a statistical category and one that doesn't have a lot of individuals in it.

And while it doesn't fit well on a business card, it is who and what I am. But, even for me, it's not a perfect title. It can't, for example, open the door to the complexity of who I am or the contributions that I've been able to make over the years. And it certainly falls short of expressing the gratitude that I have for

being able to work with researchers dedicated to ending the HIV epidemic. Nor can it express the extreme gratitude, each day, for men and women living with HIV who continue to dedicate their lives to saving mine, including the HIV positive man who taught me how to use a condom.

The National Association of People Living with AIDS (NAPWA) has set aside September 27 as the National Gay Men's HIV AIDS Awareness Day, to help gay men remember how much we have accomplished together in the fight against HIV/AIDS, remember the quarter-million lovers and brothers we have lost, and renew our commitment to ending what is now an endable epidemic.

For the past three decades, brave men have joined groups like the National Black Gay Men's Advocacy Coalition (NBGMAC) in a national, focused, policy and service drive that is dedicated to improving the health and well-being of black gay men through individual action, collective responsibility and education about research.

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I am honored to be employed by the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, a research organization that is working to find a vaccine against a deadly killer that is still, right now, at this moment, burning through the human race. Ironically, a new infection occurs in the U.S. every 10 minutes with the greatest impact on young, black gay men while attention wanes and resources dwindle.

Many have been fooled into thinking that we have the disease under control with drugs, condoms and education. And, that we have made it into a chronic disease through the use of pills. But don't be fooled: HIV is a disease on the move. It continues to be a major health threat.

The only way to end this epidemic, the only way any epidemic has ever been cured, is with a vaccine.

Today, I am part of a team of national and global warriors from an institution that is now leading the charge to find an HIV vaccine while working collectively to make a cure possible for those already infected. Even though we don't have one yet, we will ultimately develop an HIV vaccine. A preventative vaccine is critical for Africans, African Americans and other communities of color already suffering from health disparities.

This is especially true for individuals, communities, and countries that cannot afford expensive HIV therapies.

Again, only a vaccine has the potential to eradicate an illness from the face of the earth. But HIV is different, and more troubling, than other diseases we have faced in the past. If we are to end this disease, we must have volunteers ready to participate in vaccine development, trials and readiness. Black and other sexually active gay men and transgenders can still get in on the chance to move the science forward in 18 cities across America. Right now, the HIV Vaccine Trials Network (HVTN) is conducting a vaccine efficacy trial known as HVTN 505. They need participants to step up and join this effort to end the HIV epidemic. Those interested can learn more by visiting www.HopeTakesAction.org.

But there is other work to be done. In a sense, the challenge raised by NAPWA is similar to one made by the Black AIDS Institute's Phill Wilson. For the last couple of decades, Wilson has made the simple call: Know your HIV status. As he has said, "We do better, when we know better."

So let's do what we can, wear condoms, make wise choices about health and use every tool available.

Let's seize the day and be the ones we've been searching for. Let's know our HIV status. Whether positive or negative, let's support research and engage in using the tools we have to end this epidemic. We don't need another Juneteenth because we haven't heard about the latest tools that can make our communities free from HIV infections, that can move beyond historic stigma and discrimination. Instead, let's encourage each other, men and women at risk, to know how to end AIDS.

Steven Wakefield is an HIV negative Black Gay Health Advocate and Director of External Relations for the HIV Vaccine Trials Network.

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