

AFC In The News

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VIEWS: LGBT health, An issue that could use a little attention

by Jim Pickett

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We are living in some thrilling times. The incredible grassroots energy around gay-marriage rights is nothing short of breathtaking. We—the LGBT community—are more organized than ever. (Thanks, Facebook!) And with a friend in the White House who cares about civil rights and science and education and the rule of law and actually listens, we are poised to make some serious progress, even as the global economy looks grimmer every day.

With all that said—I have a plea. Move LGBT health to the front of the line. Please.

Marriage rocks—but it won't fix the disparities our lovely rainbow faces. Many health professionals are not sensitive to LGBT health concerns and lack cultural competency and training in serving LGBT consumers. Because of homophobia, transphobia, stigma and discrimination, LGBT people often withhold critical personal information from healthcare providers which may lead to negative health outcomes.

Marriage rocks ... and marriage rolls—but it won't address the huge numbers of LGBT youth who face homophobic taunts and violence. According to a 2005 national survey released by GLSEN (the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network) :

—Three-fourths of students heard remarks such as “faggot” or “dyke” used as an insult frequently or often at school;

—Over a third of students experienced physical harassment at school on the basis of sexual orientation; and

—Nearly one-fifth of students had been physically assaulted because of their sexual orientation.

The health impacts of this kind of systematic violence and harassment are obvious and lasting.

Marriage is a civil right for which many are fighting like hell. Huzzah for them and us. But marriage rights won't reduce our high rates of substance use/abuse—both licit and illicit. And they won't help a transman or transwoman access health insurance denied to them because of his or her sexual and gender identities.

Before anyone flips his or her wig, let me emphasize that I am in no way suggesting our movement replace marriage equality with LGBT health as a priority issue. Just let health share the space up to wedding day and beyond. It's not an “either/or.” It's a “both/and.” There's certainly room for us to focus on more than one important issue, right? And let's be clear: Health is an issue that impacts all us—the marryin' kind, and those content to never walk down the aisle who are happy and content with other ways to organize their loves, lusts, friends and relationships.

Health and healthcare access are fundamental human-rights issues. We must put the same activist fervor and creativity into support for comprehensive, culturally competent, quality, responsive healthcare that many of us devote to marriage rights. Let's share LGBT health issues on Facebook, tweet them on Twitter, blog them, march and rally and yell long and hard for healthcare that counts us, respects us and provides the care and prevention services we need and deserve.

This week is the 7th Annual National LGBT Health Awareness Week. With a theme of "Expect More," the National Coalition for LGBT Health is calling on LGBT communities to educate ourselves about our unique health needs and point to available resources. Check out the Web site at www.lgbthealth.net/awarenessweek09/ to find ways you can make a difference today, tomorrow and the day after that.

This summer, Chicago will host the 2009 National LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex) Health Summit. Running Aug. 14-18, the summit will focus on "Health Through the Life Course" and is dedicated to preserving and improving the emotional, physical, spiritual, intellectual, psychological, environmental and social health and wellness of LGBTI people of all races, ages, and professional/non professional backgrounds; from urban and rural settings; representing every socioeconomic class.

The summit kicks off its first day with the Bi Health Summit, the purpose of which is to share knowledge about health issues affecting bisexuals and men and women who have multi-gendered sexuality, and to build health advocacy skills among bisexual people and our allies. (Visit the summit's Web site at www.2009lgbtihealth.org for full information.)

Significantly, 2009 marks the 40th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. In the same way the riots kicked off four dynamic decades of gay activism around civil rights, summit organizers in Chicago hope for this gathering (sans broken bottles) to amp up awareness, advocacy, education and energy around the assets and challenges in our communities that impact our health outcomes.

"This anniversary is a significant milestone in the LGBTI rights movement in the United States and a great time to focus on improving the health and well being of our diverse communities," said Cat Jefcoat, summit co-chair and director of the Lesbian Community Care Project at Howard Brown Health Center.

This summit is the fourth of its kind. Philadelphia hosted the last National LGBTI Health Summit in 2007, and previous conferences have been held in Cambridge, Mass., and Denver. Local partners for the 2009 summit include AIDS Foundation of Chicago and Howard Brown Health Center, the organizational co-chairs. In addition, Center on Halsted, Test Positive Aware Network, Haymarket Center and the Chicago Department of Public Health's Office of LGBT Health are also involved in planning and outreach activities, among others.

According to Simone Koehlinger, the director of the Office of LGBT Health, "we are very excited to be a part of the summit planning. The LGBT community is not always used to focusing on and celebrating our health. In fact, we often battle messages that tell us that we don't matter or that we are inherently unhealthy. This event will serve as a strong antidote to those messages."

"The summit is a great opportunity for LGBTIs and our allies to come together, examine ways we can increase the community's well-being, share our successes, and get re-energized about living to our fullest," she continued.

After engaging in a series of workshops and activities involving bisexual visibility and well-being; sexual liberation, spirituality and marriage equality as a health strategy; self-care and meditation to culturally competent LGBTI mental health research, programming and administration; and the role of alcohol and other substances in our communities, participants will walk away from this summit with the tools to confidently navigate, educate and change the healthcare system.

Proposals for workshops and panel discussions for both the Bi Health Summit and the broader LGBTI Summit are being accepted at www.2009lgbtihealth.org until March 31. The Web site is where individuals may also register, apply for scholarships, sign up to volunteer, and join in a number of planning activities already underway.

We look forward to broad participation at the summit. And in the meantime, we hope many will join us in giving LGBT health more than a little attention and make it a top priority for today, tomorrow and the day after that.

Jim Pickett is director of advocacy for the AIDS Foundation of Chicago and is the 2009 National LGBTI Health Summit co-chair.

See 2009lgbtihealth.org for more info.