

World AIDS Day: OPSEU hails advances – and calls for more

This year marks three decades since the first World AIDS Day was observed in 1988.

It was a bleak time. The first International AIDS Conference had been held just three years before. A cure seemed like a pipe dream. The only available treatment, AZT, often carried crippling side effects. Prevention was the focus and was considered the only way to reduce the number of those infected or and dying from HIV-related illnesses.

Tragically, the stigma attached to HIV/AIDS spread just as fast as the disease did in the 1980s, and is only gradually disappearing. In some areas of the world, this attitude created barriers to funding for research into treatments, while in others, governments pretended HIV didn't exist. Millions died who may not have had to. Sadly, stigma and discrimination continue – and Canada is not exempt.

This stigma prevents people from learning about their HIV status. In fact, fully one-quarter of all individuals with HIV are unaware they have it. That means a greater potential for the virus to spread, while the person infected wastes precious time – when time is of the essence for effective treatment.

That's why the theme of World AIDS Day 2018 is "Know your status." In addition to facing stigma and discrimination, many people have little or no access to confidential HIV testing. This is completely counterproductive when it comes to putting a stop to HIV/AIDS and is inexcusable. Governments must have the will and the means to expand HIV testing as much as possible.

We can never let our guard down when it comes to HIV/AIDS. Although treatments are available in the West, the picture in the rest of the world is more grim. Last year, some 1.8 million individuals were infected with HIV. About 37 million live with HIV, but only 59 per cent have access to treatment.

As a result, almost one million people died in 2017 – more women than men. That's the population of Ottawa. Imagine walking through the streets of our nation's capital, knowing that every, single resident had died in the last 12 months. That's what HIV/AIDS is doing every, single year.

But there's hope. The number of annual deaths is half what it was 13 years ago. We are making progress. We just haven't made enough – not even close.

We are proud of the work that OPSEU members have done to try to eliminate HIV/AIDS. Our Live and Let Live Fund fights HIV/AIDS in Ontario and Africa. In addition to an annual board donation, a silent auction at Convention raises substantial funds. In fact, at Convention 2018, the silent auction raised over \$17,000 – the most ever.

If we needed any more reasons to be proud to lead the best union in the world, this is yet another.

Further, OPSEU recently completed work on an [extensive new resource](#), "HIV/AIDS: Your work, your union, your rights." It includes a wide range of information, tools and resources to help make OPSEU and other workplaces better for all.

At this time of year, we also want to give a shout-out to all OPSEU members who, directly or indirectly, give of themselves to care for those with HIV-related illnesses. This includes the dedicated members of Local 501, who work at Casey House Hospice in Toronto.

Be part of the fight. Be part of the solution – whether or not you've been personally touched by someone with HIV/AIDS, as so many of us at OPSEU have. On December 1, wear a red ribbon. And if you can, consider making a tax-deductible [donation to the Live and Let Live Fund](#). It doesn't have to be large. But you may just save a human life.

In solidarity,

Warren (Smokey) Thomas

Eduardo (Eddy) Almeida