

**A Declaration of Liberation:  
Building a Racially Just and Strategic Domestic HIV Movement**  
*Presented by the Racial Justice Framework Group  
November 9, 2017*

- *What could radical leadership look like from an aligned, collaborative group of people of color under current conditions in HIV community work, and in the HIV movement?*
- *What becomes possible when organizations begin to share resources, ideas, space, in ways outside the patriarchal model of "keeping what's mine" to which we have been indoctrinated?*
- *If practices at your organization present a barrier to your ability to work in ways you know are an actual path to health, dignity, and liberation for communities of color, what do you need from a group that is an "escape hatch"?*

We, as a collective of people of color leaders in the HIV justice movement, write these words in the most precarious of times. The current president of the United States uses his platform in service of the oppression of people of color and other marginalized communities. Our efforts are often overwhelmed by the weight of violence, past and present, directed at our sacred black and brown bodies. **Yet we are not fragile. We are boundlessly powerful.** People of color have always fought back, and led the way in innovating new, creative responses to oppression. We have not only history, but also the force of an inclusive, intersectional and transformative vision on our side.

**This document is our declaration of liberation.** It begins to name and claim a collective vision for resistance practice in the HIV movement, grounded in racial justice.

*It is our assertion that any response to the impact of HIV must be rooted in a racial justice framework.*

It is undeniable that in the United States, white supremacy structures access to healthcare, funding and resources, creation of policies, and public narratives about who is deserving of support. Further, white supremacy has historically shaped and continues to intensify conditions faced by our communities as a consequence of patriarchy, Islamophobia, colonization, imperialism, and globalization. We are clear that racial injustice intersects with many different forms of oppression and marginalization. *In this document we center race, racial inequity, and racial justice.*

Racial justice, by our definition, is the collective practice of people of color and allies to identify, dismantle, and heal from the many external and internal harms of structural and institutional racism. This practice invites us to collaborate across communities of color in service of dismantling white supremacy and building power. Communities of color pitted against each other is one of many conditions on which white supremacy depends. *We envision a movement premised on solidarity, collaboration, and in coalition.*

***The work of racial justice in the HIV movement is not new.*** Though much of the role of people of color in the early HIV movement has been whitewashed from historical narratives, we carry their courage in our efforts, and remember them through the spirit of their work that lives in ours. *In the spirit of our communities' legacies, we commit to exploring radical action to create the change we seek.*

*"Advocates and policy makers are racing to end the HIV pandemic; **but that will remain a tall task if we continue to look away from the racial injustices experienced by Black and brown bodies.** The past 35 years have taught us that HIV is not a single issue; neither is the issue of race. The updated national HIV strategy guides us to look deeper into social determinants of HIV prevention and treatment; it is time to recognize how oppressions intertwine, and how racial inequity affects every praxis that drives the pandemic.*

***"There is no better time than now to affirm our goals to build power among racial, sexual, and gender minority communities."***

*- Cecilia Chung, Senior Director of Strategic Projects, Transgender Law Center*

This document serves as a lens for analyzing the present moment and its future implications. It is also an expression of the love we bring to this work -- a call to summon the magic that emerges when people of color speak and work from the truth of our experience, and strategize to build power. We maintain that at the core of true love is accountability: to one another, to the beloved community, and to our shared values. *Power is the manifestation of our collective visions into coordinated action. Power is what happens when we build together.*

*"HIV is a **sign of inequity in this country and the world.** Our country's approach to prevention and care focused on controlling Black and brown bodies, and heteronormative education instead of embracing an understanding of pleasure, culture, and identity, continue to hurt those most impacted by HIV. In these politically charged times, it is important for us to have a place to create what is needed for us to promote true health equity and end the epidemic. "This framework, and those who collaborated to create it, intend to help **create a political home -- a space for us to learn, grow, and build with one another rooted in community, racial justice and intersectionality,** in order to break down the silos and push for our communities to thrive."*  
- Maximillian Boykin, Manager,  
HIV Prevention Justice Alliance

Communities of color encompass people of all class backgrounds; trans and cisgender women and men; queer-identified and gender nonconforming folks; immigrants with and without documentation; people of all religious practices, all languages, all ages. This is true of the HIV community as well. *We commit to developing and nurturing a leadership body in the HIV movement that reflects this variation, uplifting Black and brown leadership and centering communities that are most impacted by the epidemic.*

Let us remember, because there are those forces that are invested in our forgetting, that **Black Lives Matter**; that **no human being is illegal**; that **healthcare**, including comprehensive sexual and reproductive care, **is a human right** regardless of country of origin.

## How Do We Get There?

A racial justice lens for the HIV movement demands that we:

(1) Integrate racial justice into our organizations and political strategies;

- (2) Center those communities most impacted by the epidemic in leadership and decision-making;
- (3) Root our efforts to advance a racial justice lens in the HIV movement in accountability to the communities that we lead;
- (4) Ensure equity around allocation of resources -- human, material, and financial;
- (5) Work to transform and, where necessary, dismantle institutions that uphold white supremacy and compromise the wellbeing of communities of color.

### *Culture is our strength*

Communities of color are not monolithic. Our unique histories, cultural differences, and shared experiences of living under racist power structures have shaped us as individuals, as well as our institutions and movements. These differences enrich us. They may also lead to tension and conflict. Conflict is not inherently negative; it yields abundant and fertile ground for learning, deconstructing, and healing. *We commit to embrace and engage in constructive conflict in our collective work, honoring the wisdoms of our myriad cultures in the spirit of learning.*

### *Anti-Blackness*

As an HIV community working within the context of the United States, a nation whose economy was built on genocide of indigenous people and slavery primarily from the African continent, and whose HIV epidemic vastly disproportionately affects and kills people of African descent, addressing anti-Blackness is central to our practice of racial justice. Anti-Blackness is at the root of imperialism and other forms of racism, and structures racialization in all communities of color. *We commit to examine and eliminate anti-Blackness in our coalitions, our movements, and within ourselves.*

### *Undoing the myth of exceptionalism in the U.S. context*

To talk about racial justice in the U.S. context is to also talk about who counts and is valued as “American,” who deserves public empathy, resources, and rights; and, consequently, who is not. Constructs of what it means to be “American” have been shaped by racist ideologies used to justify subjugation, violence, and genocide against people of color here and abroad. Today, access to healthcare, education, the ability to vote, and the right to a fair trial by a jury of one’s peers continue to be shaped through white supremacist notions of political borders. *We commit, as part of our practice of racial justice, to challenge notions of American exceptionalism.*

### Systemic inequity

Conditions of poverty and economic injustice, gender bias and gender-based violence, white supremacy and racial trauma, create settings in which the HIV epidemic continues to thrive. These are not natural conditions; they are intentionally embedded in the structures of our society. HIV is not and never has been just a disease; the ongoing epidemic remains “proof positive of injustice.” Ignoring these structural inequities does not make them go away; neither does individual behavior change by itself. *We commit to a root cause analysis in our work, and to fighting the systemic barriers to life, health, dignity, and power for all our communities.*

### Dismantling racist institutions

*“As someone who works in the HIV field and is also living with HIV, I see the disparities and stereotypes occurring on each side. **Anti-Blackness is as much a cancer as racism.** You can see it everywhere -- in care, in case management, among people living with HIV -- in how Black community members are judged, stereotyped, mocked, disregarded, in all kinds of large and small ways. We talk about stigma, but we don't talk about anti-Blackness; we talk about institutional racism, but we don't talk about individual racism. That is always easiest, because you're not calling people out; but sometimes you have to call people out.*

*“If you say you agree with this document and you don't change practices in your organization, I can hold up the document and say, **'You need to read this again.** You need to have your staff read this document. You need to do an in-service training on this material.’ More than a three-day Undoing Racism class, **this work must be ongoing, because all these 'isms' are ongoing and we won't go anywhere until we address that. To fix it, we have to name it.**”*

*- Gina Brown, Community Organizer, Southern AIDS Coalition*

At present, to protect and serve our people often requires building our expertise and capacity to reform structures -- for instance, through legislative and policy interventions -- that are flawed at their core and serve to maintain oppressive conditions for Black and brown people. We value our colleagues who engage in this work in a principled way, with a racial justice approach. *We acknowledge the need to build with value-aligned accomplices -- trusting, trustworthy individuals -- even those who work within institutions that were never designed to uplift communities of color.*

Our vision also requires dismantling systems designed to control and silence our people, and sap our communities of their power -- such as racist policing, mass incarceration, and immigration detention. These and other institutions hold in place a framework of profound inequity, of which HIV is a symptom among many. *We commit to opposing oppressive institutions, and uplifting multiple types and definitions of power and leadership, in the service of our collective liberation.*

## **Racial Justice in the HIV Movement**

It is our contention that any struggle for justice or equity in HIV must become a racial justice movement. Health inequities faced by Black, brown, and indigenous people, historically and in our present moment, are structured by historical and present-day racism. If we claim to be leaders in HIV prevention, access to care, or human rights, it is our responsibility to pressure institutions from the clinic to the government, from funders to the courtroom, to act in the service of racial equity and justice, and to divest from the interests of white supremacy.

Already an integral part of the fabric of the HIV community are the principles of meaningful involvement of people living with HIV (MIPA). *Meaningful involvement is not and must not be limited to HIV status.* We assert that any response to the HIV epidemic is incomplete without leadership, active participation, and guidance of Black and brown people in all aspects of that response.

*"My call to our white colleagues in the HIV/AIDS movement is to decide whether you will continue to embrace the exceptionality framework in your individual activism, or would you commit to collective organizing. **Would you be able to work in settings where sometimes you would not have the last word, or craft the strategy, pace and tone of projects? Would you be able to learn how to share political imagination, work, and freedom and not be the one in charge? For example, in the work of HIV/AIDS and immigration, I have yet to experience intersectional justice; my grassroots-led work at times feels invisible, or is received with less than an open heart.***

*"By embracing racial justice, you must learn how to **accept discomfort, take risks, and stand side by side with us: leaders of color that work with integrity and have a vision to get things done.**"*

- Marco Castro-Bojorquez,  
Venas Abiertas

The "whitening" of HIV, in both cultural narratives of the epidemic and movement history, have conspired to erase the voices and stories of people of color. Because our stories are a source of power, the whitening of HIV leadership in many organizations has had detrimental consequences. We see these consequences at all levels, but especially at the level of data collection: When communities most affected by HIV do not dictate how we are identified and accounted for, then data cannot tell an accurate story of our experiences.

## **Applying a Racial Justice Framework**

This is a living document. We encourage folks to use it in any way you see fit, and to reach out to the Racial Justice Framework group to communicate about what's been useful. For example, this document may be used:

- as an analytical tool
- to introduce aligned individuals to a potential political

home

- as a discussion piece, perhaps in an intentional discussion group within or across organizations
- to inspire other aligned folks at your organization to get together and demand a racial justice audit of the organization

... or it could be as simple as starting to observe, to ask yourself questions about your own experience in this movement, based on what you've read here. We look forward to exploring needs for additional materials, and coordinating efforts to provide those resources tailored to key areas of our communities.

## The Way Forward

Where there is repression, there has always been resistance. This is the tradition that we stand in.

Thus, **we believe that we will win.**

Yours in solidarity,

The Racial Justice Framework Group:

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*Gina Brown, Southern AIDS Coalition*

*Marco Castro-Bojorquez, Venas Abiertas*

*Cecilia Chung, Transgender Law Center*

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*Suraj Madoori, Treatment Action Group*

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*Kiara St. James, New York Trans Advocacy Group*

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*Charles Stephens, CounterNarrative Project*

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*Aimee Thorne-Thomsen, Advocates for Youth*

*Lisa Diane White, SisterLove, Inc.*