

Zero Discrimination Day 2024 – Statement from the Board of Directors of the International Council of AIDS Service Organizations

March 1, 2024. Today marks the 10th annual commemoration of Zero Discrimination Day, observed annually on March 1 to promote equality, inclusion, and diversity while raising awareness about the harmful impact of discrimination worldwide. Over the past decade, we have seen a disintegration of the rights of people most affected and most vulnerable to HIV and AIDS, supported by religious extremists and bigoted lobbyists. The Board of Directors of the International Council of AIDS Service Organizations (ICASO) recognizes the danger posed by the rising global “anti-rights movement” through its direct targeting of the rights and voices of women and LGBTQI+ citizens around the world. Discrimination in any form undermines human dignity, perpetuates inequalities, and hinders progress in addressing HIV and other public health crises.

The most recent affront to LGBTQI+ rights comes from Ghana, where the country’s parliament passed a sweeping bill that imposes a prison sentence of up to five years for the “wilful promotion, sponsorship, or support of LGBTQ+ activities.” Sadly, the anti-rights bills have plenty of support both in Ghana and globally. Since 2008, U.S.-based right-wing Christian groups have spent more than \$280 million fighting gay and abortion rights abroad. More than \$50 million has gone toward courting African politicians and religious leaders and funding programs that oppose sexual and reproductive rights throughout the continent. Aside from lobbying politicians to pass anti-homosexuality laws, groups such as Heartbeat International have established “pregnancy crisis centers” in South Africa, Uganda and Nigeria to promote anti-abortion ideology.

Similarly, the government of El Salvador ordered the removal of LGBTQI+ references from official documents in the Education and Health Ministries. This has led to the removal of LGBTQI+ content, the closure of the National HIV program site, and the denial of services to key populations. As these anti-rights campaigns gain traction and results, gay men, transgender women, young women and adolescent girls continue to bear the burden of new HIV infections. ICASO stands in solidarity with efforts to ramp up pro Human Rights and anti-discrimination efforts in Ghana, El Salvador and globally.

We have learned time and time again over the past 40 years of addressing HIV, that all those who fight to limit gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights are on the wrong side of history - They must not prevail. Let this day serve as a powerful reminder that our diversity is our strength.

The Board of Directors of the International Council of AIDS Service Organizations includes Tamara Adrian (Venezuela), Mark Heywood (South Africa), Amy Israel (USA), Shatyam Issur (Mauritius), Brian Kanyemba (South Africa), Tamil Kendall (Canada), Ron MacInnis (USA), Lucy Njenga (Kenya), Yolanda Simon (Trinidad) and Zaza Tsereteli (Georgia). ICASO’s work is led by Executive Director Mary Ann Torres.