

February 1, 2023

Delegate Luke Clippinger, et. al.
House Judiciary Committee
Maryland General Assembly
Room 101
House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: IN SUPPORT OF HB 287 - Public Health: Prohibition on Transfer of Human Immunodeficiency Virus - Repeal

(Committee Hearing Scheduled for February 7, 2023 at 1p.m. ET)

Dear Delegate Clippinger, et. al.,

I am Ronald Johnson and I am a Marylander living with HIV testifying in favor of HB 287, a bill on “*Public Health - Prohibition on Transfer of Human Immunodeficiency Virus - Repeal*”. To understand why I passionately support HB 287, I need to start from the beginning. Being a Black gay man living in New York City in the early ‘80s I was one of the first wave of community members to notice a “strange disease” beginning to surface. I wanted to know more about it and get more involved, which led me to become a volunteer at Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC), the first community-based organization dealing with HIV. That started the very long journey of being involved in fighting HIV as a profession and as an advocate. In 1989, my partner got ill, and he tested positive, so I got tested as well. That’s when I learned I was also living with HIV and I figured I only had a few years left to live.

Now at 74 years old, I live with my husband in Silver Spring, Maryland. We have been together for over 20 years, married for over five. Thanks to the many technological and scientific advancements in HIV treatment and prevention options, I am living in good health. Although I’m retired, fighting discriminatory and stigmatizing HIV criminalization laws like ours in Maryland keeps me active. Sometimes when my phone rings like it did for this hearing, I think, wait a minute, I’m supposed to be retired! But we’ve always known that HIV was more than a medical condition, that it was a ‘social disease.’ The HIV epidemic exists in the context of inequalities of health care in general, inequalities of income and economics, rights and racial injustices. And a contributing factor of these inequalities is our current law that criminalizes HIV.

Under Maryland's current HIV criminalizing law, Black people, who are already disproportionately targeted by our criminal justice system, are most likely to be additionally criminalized by these laws. This is especially true in Maryland, considering 74.4% of Marylanders living with diagnosed HIV in 2021 were Black people. Consequently, this law systematically targets Black Marylanders living with HIV including Marylanders who happen to be Black *and* gay like myself.

Repealing this law is also recommended by the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) because HIV criminalization contradicts science and doesn't take into consideration treatment and technological advancements since the early days of the epidemic. One notable advancement is the overwhelming clinical evidence that people with HIV who achieve and maintain an undetectable viral load and who maintain adherence to their antiretroviral therapy cannot sexually transmit HIV to others. This clinical finding has been affirmed by the CDC and the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID).

I truly believe in the fact that we can end this epidemic -- there is hope. In the late '80s, there was so little hope and so many people died and were dying quickly. Seeing that turn around keeps me motivated. Yes, we are in a dangerous position policy-wise, in terms of laws like the one that exist here in Maryland. But I know from experience that we can turn death around, and can turn this dismal phase around if we continue to aggressively fight HIV that includes repealing these laws and supporting legislation like HB 287.

For all these reasons, I respectfully ask that you vote in favor of HB 287. Please email me if I can provide additional information at rjohn0403@aol.com.

Sincerely,

Ronald Johnson
1220 Blair Mill Road
Silver Spring, MD 20910