

Testimony of Sean Strub in support of HB632

Pennsylvania House Judiciary Committee

Harrisburg

June 2, 2025

Good morning, I am Sean Strub, from Milford Borough, the Pike County seat in Northeast PA. I served as Milford's mayor from 2016 to 2024, am a business owner and have lived with HIV for more than 40 years. I founded POZ magazine, a resource that reaches more than 70% of People Living with HIV (PLWHIV) in the U.S. each month and the Sero Project, a U.S.-based network of people living with HIV combatting stigma, discrimination, and HIV criminalization in the U.S. and Latin America.

When I assert that HIV-related stigma is more insidious and damaging today than it was in the early years, it surprises some people, especially those who are HIV negative. That's because most people have seen the Tom Hanks character in the movie Philadelphia, covered in purple Kaposi's sarcoma lesions (like I once was), or remember a time when one had to wear a hazmat suit to visit someone with AIDS in a hospital.

More precisely, the fear of casual contagion experienced by those without HIV has lessened dramatically, as we learned so much more about the actual routes and risks of HIV transmission.

But stigma – as experienced by the stigmatized – is something more complex. It isn't just about people being afraid to touch us or be near us. Stigma as experienced by the stigmatized is about:

- One's moral worth being evaluated, before anyone has even met you, with assumptions made about your sexual behaviors, drug use or other factors;
- One's words being discounted before they even leave your mouth;
- Marginalization and discrimination, especially with younger generations less likely to know people with HIV personally, or to understand how HIV science has changed so profoundly;
- Internalized stigma or self-stigmatization; a diagnosis today is far lonelier than it was years ago;
- And in its most extreme form – criminalization – when the government makes laws that only apply to some people in society based on immutable characteristics, whether it is by gender, race, physical ability or disability, genetic makeup or viruses one might carry.

By those measures, stigma is much worse today.

There's no question that criminalization drives stigma, and that is what makes it such a terrible health policy, in large part because it discourages people at risk from getting tested. We know that getting tested is the first step to getting into care and becoming non-infectious.

But when people hear about the potential legal consequences from getting tested if they're otherwise feeling fine, why would they take the test? That's why we have sometimes heard "take the test and risk arrest," especially in communities that hold law enforcement and public health officials with some degree of suspicion or distrust.

Strong evidence shows that criminalization also makes those who are diagnosed less likely to participate in traditional public health disease prevention programs, including counseling services and contact tracing. They are also less likely to access

treatment, for fear of the stigma associated with visiting a clinic or doctor known to treat people with HIV.

We've had miraculous advances in science that enabled me to survive, and newly diagnosed persons to live normal lifespans. Current treatment brings the virus to undetectable levels, so a person living with HIV today can pose no risk of sexually transmitting the virus.

The obstacle today isn't the virus itself; it's the stigma and, unfortunately, there's no pill to treat stigma.

That's why the American Medical Association, the American Bar Association, the National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors, American Psychiatric Association, National Association of County and City Health Officials, the U.S. Conference of Mayors and so many other professional organizations have called for an end to HIV criminalization and why the U.S. Department of Justice and Centers for Disease Control have issued guidance for states to make their statutes consistent with the science.

Pennsylvania, in so many ways, has been at the forefront of effective response to the epidemic. HB632 removes the last reference to HIV in the PA criminal code. I hope this committee will see the wisdom of joining other states in modernizing the law.

Thank you.

About Sean Strub, Testifier

Sean Strub is the former mayor (2017-2024) of Milford, Pennsylvania, where he has been active in historic preservation, downtown revitalization and other civic endeavors since the mid-90s. In 1994, he founded POZ magazine (POZ.com) and served as its executive editor until 2004. Today, POZ is a highly respected award-winning resource for people living with HIV. In 2012, he launched the Sero Project to combat HIV-related stigma and criminalization. He is a frequent speaker on these topics at law schools, graduate schools of public health, professional meetings and conferences, in the U.S., Europe and Africa. He has been living with HIV for more than 40 years.