



## **Stonewall National Museum & Archives** **AIDS Timeline – The First Twenty Years**

### **Introduction**

The United States has had a long-standing discomfort with the transgression of sexual and gender norms. Influenced by religious ideals, society viewed people who had same-sex desires and engaged in same-sex practices to be immoral and sinful. As such, the US has long enacted laws to control and condemn those who betray sexual and gender norms. Since the nation's earliest days, federal, state and local laws punished those who betrayed sexual and gender norms, often as a capital offense.

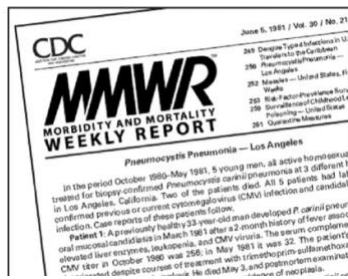
During the latter part of the nineteenth century, commerce and industry flourished, causing people to move from rural communities to more developed urban areas. As a result of these social transformations, same-sex practices increased, as did organized efforts to suppress them. Accordingly, our examination of LGBTQ history in the United States begins after the Civil War and the growth of industrialization and urbanization. Despite insistent homophobia and transphobia in politics, culture, and society over the past 170 years, LGBTQ people have remained resilient, creative, and dedicated to the fight for rights and visibility. Rather than a comprehensive overview, this timeline is intended to provide a snapshot of significant moments in LGBTQ history so as to encourage further engagement and exploration.

Check out other LGBTQ history timeline selections that specifically explore visual art, theater and dance, literature, film and television, music, sports, and more in this series.

Relying heavily upon research and text within a chronology organized at [HIV.gov](https://www.hiv.gov) as well as other sources, this timeline focuses on key events relating to the discovery, impact, scientific research, public policy and community response to AIDS from 1981 to 2001.

There are many organizations such as the [World AIDS Museum](https://www.worldaidsmuseum.org), [ACT UP](https://actup.org), [AHF](https://www.aidsfoundation.org) which offer a historical perspective, encourage public engagement, distribute facts about treatment and provide support. We encourage you to visit these sites to learn more.

1981



**June 5** U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) describes cases of a rare lung infection, *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia (PCP), in five young, previously healthy gay men in Los Angeles. These men have other unusual infections as well, indicating that their immune systems are not working; two have already died by the time the report is published. This edition of the MMWR marks the first official reporting of what will become known as the AIDS epidemic.

**June 6** Within days, CDC receives numerous reports of similar cases of PCP and other opportunistic infections among gay men—including reports of a cluster of cases of a rare, unusually aggressive cancer, Kaposi’s Sarcoma (KS), among a group of gay men in New York and California.

**June 8** In response to these reports, CDC establishes the Task Force on Kaposi’s Sarcoma and Opportunistic Infections to identify risk factors and to develop a case definition for national surveillance.



**July 3** *New York Times* publishes an article entitled “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals.” At this point, the term “gay cancer” enters the public lexicon.

The *Times* was criticized by the *Village Voice* for “ruining” the July 4<sup>th</sup> Weekend for gays. [More.](#)

Given the symptoms, it was later determined that some of the earlier PWAs may have contracted the virus in the late 1970s. The first case of Karposi Sarcoma was diagnosed in NY in 1979.



**December 10** Bobbi Campbell, a San Francisco nurse, becomes the first KS patient to go public. Calling himself the “KS Poster Boy,” Campbell writes a newspaper column on living with “gay cancer” for the *San Francisco Sentinel*. He also posts photos of his lesions in the window of a local drugstore to alert the community to the disease and encourage people to seek treatment.

By year’s end, there is a cumulative total of 270 reported cases of severe immune deficiency among gay men, and 121 individuals have died as a result of it.

**Gay-Related Immune Deficiency or  
G.R.I.D.**

**New Homosexual Disorder Worries Health Officials**



Some researchers begin calling the condition GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency). This terminology influences both the medical profession and the public's perception of the epidemic as limited to gay men, leading to serious long-term consequences for women, heterosexual men, hemophiliacs, people who inject drugs, and children.



**1982** NBC airs the first national news story on AIDS. [More.](#)

**September 24** CDC uses the term "AIDS" (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) for the first time and releases the first case definition of AIDS: "a disease at least moderately predictive of a defect in cell-mediated immunity, occurring in a person with no known case for diminished resistance to that disease."



**September 24** Rep. Henry Waxman and Rep. Phillip Burton introduce legislation to allocate \$5 million to CDC for surveillance and \$10 million to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) for AIDS research.

**December 10** CDC reports a case of AIDS in an infant who received blood transfusions. The following week, 22 cases of unexplained immunodeficiency and opportunistic infections in infants are announced.

Gay Men's Health Crisis is founded in NYC in response to the crisis.

**1983** January 4: CDC hosts a public meeting with representatives from the [U.S. Food and Drug Administration](#) (FDA), NIH, the blood services community, gay activists, and

hemophilia specialists to identify opportunities to protect the nation's blood supply from AIDS. Yet participants fail to reach consensus on appropriate action.

**January 7** CDC reports cases of AIDS in female sexual partners of males with AIDS.

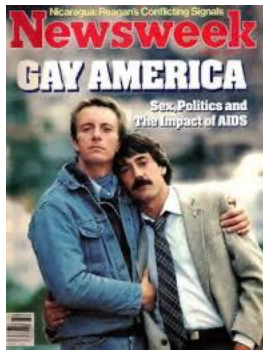
**March** CDC notes that most cases of AIDS have been reported among homosexual men with multiple sexual partners, people who inject drugs, Haitians, and hemophiliacs. The report suggests that AIDS may be caused by an infectious agent that is transmitted sexually or through exposure to blood or blood products and issues recommendations for preventing transmission.



**June** People living with AIDS (PLWAs) take over the plenary stage at the National AIDS Forum in Denver, issuing a statement on the right of PLWAs to be at the table when policy is made, to be treated with dignity, and to be called "people with AIDS," not "AIDS victims." The statement becomes known as The Denver Principles and it serves as the charter for the founding of the National Association of People with AIDS. [More](#).



**July 25** San Francisco General Hospital opens Ward 5B, the first dedicated AIDS ward in the U.S. It is fully occupied within days. The ward offers compassionate, holistic care for AIDS patients, and all staff in the ward—from nurses to janitors—have volunteered to work there. This becomes known as the "San Francisco model of care" for HIV-positive patients.



**August 8** AIDS activist Bobbi Campbell appears with his partner, Bobby Hilliard, on the cover of Newsweek magazine for the story, "Gay America: Sex, Politics, and the Impact of AIDS." It is the first time two gay men are pictured embracing one another on the cover of a U.S. mainstream national magazine.

**September 2** In response to growing concerns about the potential for transmission of AIDS in healthcare settings, CDC publishes the first set of occupational exposure precautions for healthcare workers and allied health professionals.

**September 9** CDC identifies all major routes of transmission—and rules out transmission by casual contact, food, water, air, or environmental surfaces.



**1984** Community-based AIDS service organizations join together to form AIDS Action, a national organization in Washington, DC, to advocate on behalf of people and communities affected by the epidemic, to educate the federal government, and to help shape AIDS-related policy and legislation.



**April 23** HHS Secretary Margaret Heckler announces that Dr. Robert Gallo and his colleagues at the National Cancer Institute have found the cause of AIDS, a retrovirus they have labeled HTLV-III. Heckler also announces the development of a diagnostic blood test to identify HTLV-III and expresses hope that a vaccine against AIDS will be produced within two years.

**July 13** CDC states that avoiding injection drug use and reducing needle-sharing “should also be effective in preventing transmission of the virus.” [More.](#)

**August 15** AIDS activist Bobbi Campbell dies of AIDS-related illness at age 32.



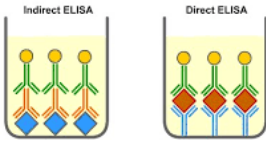
**October** San Francisco officials order bathhouses closed due to high-risk sexual activity occurring in these venues. New York follows suit within a year. [More.](#)



**1985** January 11: CDC revises the AIDS case definition to note that AIDS is caused by a newly identified virus and issue provisional guidelines for blood screening.



## ELISA test



**March 2** FDA licenses the first commercial blood test, ELISA, to detect HIV. Blood banks begin screening the U.S. blood supply.

**April 15–17** The first International AIDS Conference is held in Atlanta, Georgia.



**August 27** Ryan White, an Indiana teenager who contracted AIDS through contaminated blood products used to treat his hemophilia, is refused entry to his middle school. His family's protracted legal battles to protect Ryan's right to attend school call national attention to the issue of AIDS, and Ryan chooses to speak out publicly on the need for AIDS education. [More.](#)



**August 31** The Pentagon announces that, beginning October 1, it will begin testing all new military recruits for AIDS and will reject those who test positive for the virus.

**September 17** President Ronald Reagan mentions AIDS publicly for the first time, calling AIDS "a top priority" and defending his administration against criticisms that funding for AIDS research is inadequate.

**October 2** The U.S. Congress allocates nearly \$190 million for AIDS research—an increase of \$70 million over the Administration's budget request. The House Appropriations Committee also urges President Reagan to appoint an "AIDS czar."



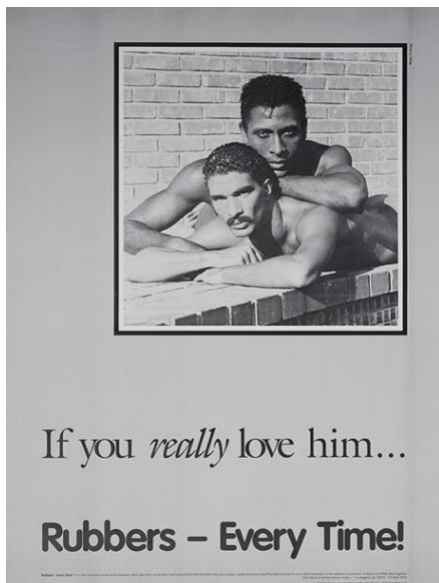
**October 2** Actor Rock Hudson dies of AIDS-related illness at age 59. He is the first major U.S. public figure to acknowledge that he has AIDS, and his death marks a turning point in public perceptions about the epidemic. Hudson leaves \$250,000 to help set up the American Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR). Actress Elizabeth Taylor serves as the organization's founding National Chairman.

**December 6** The U.S. Public Health Service issues the first recommendations for preventing viral transmission from mother to child.



By year's end, at least one AIDS case has been reported from each region of the world.

1986



**Virus that causes AIDS will officially be known as HIV**

May 9, 1986

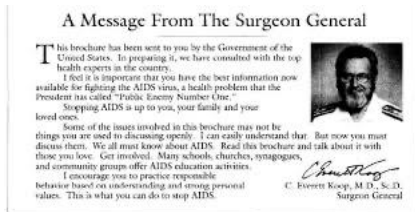
The International Committee on the Taxonomy of Viruses declares that the virus that causes AIDS will officially be known as Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV).

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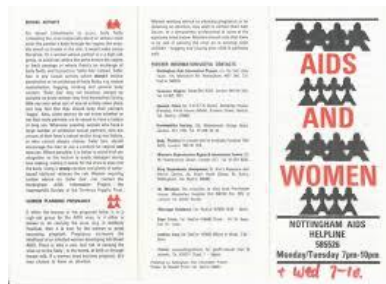
Minority AIDS Council (NMAC).

**July 18** At the National Conference on AIDS in the Black Community in Washington, DC, a group of minority leaders meets with the U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. C. Everett Koop, to discuss concerns about HIV/AIDS in communities of color. This meeting marks the unofficial founding of the National



**October 22** Dr. Koop issues the Surgeon General's Report on AIDS. The report makes it clear that HIV cannot be spread casually and calls for: a nationwide education campaign (including early sex education in schools); increased use of condoms; and voluntary HIV testing.

**October 24** CDC reports that AIDS cases are disproportionately affecting African Americans and Latinos. This is particularly true for African American and Latino children, who make up 90% of perinatally acquired AIDS cases.



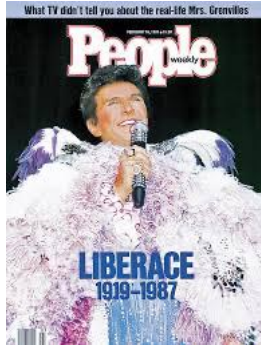
**October 29** The Institute of Medicine (IOM), the principal health unit of the National Academy of Sciences, issues a report, Confronting AIDS: Directions for Public Health, Health Care, and Research. The report calls for a "massive media, educational and public health campaign to curb the spread of the HIV infection," as well as for the creation of a National Commission on AIDS.



1987



**February** AIDS activist Cleve Jones creates the first panel of the AIDS Memorial Quilt. [More.](#)



**February 4** Emmy-award winning pianist Liberace—a largely closeted gay man—dies of AIDS-related illness at age 67.



**March** Writer and activist Larry Kramer founds the grassroots political group ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) in New York City. This direct-action organization seeks to advocate for biomedical research and treatment; support those living with HIV/AIDS; and shape legislation and policy. [More.](#)



**March 19** FDA approves the first antiretroviral drug, zidovudine (AZT). The U.S. Congress approves \$30 million in emergency funding to states for AZT, laying the groundwork for what will be the AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP), authorized by the Ryan White CARE Act in 1990.



**March 19** FDA issues regulations that expand access to promising new medications that have not yet been approved or licensed by the agency. This accelerates drug approval by two to three years.



**April 7** FDA declares HIV prevention as a new indication for male condoms.



**April 19** Princess Diana makes international headlines when she is photographed shaking the hand of an HIV-positive patient in a London hospital. She goes on to become a passionate advocate for people living with HIV and to speak forcefully against HIV/AIDS-related stigma and discrimination.

**April 29** FDA approves the Western blot blood test kit, a more specific test for HIV antibodies.

**May 15** The U.S. Public Health Service adds HIV as a “dangerous contagious disease” to its immigration exclusion list and mandates testing for all visa applicants. The HIV ban will not be lifted until January 4, 2010. [More.](#)

**May 31** At long last, President Reagan makes his first public speech about AIDS and establishes a Presidential Commission on HIV.



August 28, destroying it.

**August 5** A federal judge orders Florida’s DeSoto County School Board to enroll HIV-positive brothers, Ricky, Robert, and Randy Ray. The board had refused to allow the three boys, who are hemophiliacs, to attend. After the ruling, outraged town residents refuse to allow their children to attend school, and someone sets fire to the Ray house on

**August 14** CDC issues Perspectives in Disease Prevention and Health Promotion: Public Health Service Guidelines for Counseling and Antibody Testing to Prevent HIV Infection and AIDS.

**August 18** FDA sanctions the first human testing of a candidate vaccine against HIV.

**September 30** CDC launches the first AIDS-related public service announcements, America Responds to AIDS, to kick off the newly designated AIDS Awareness Month in October.



**October 11** The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt goes on display for the first time on the National Mall in Washington, DC. The display features 1,920 4x8 panels and draws half a million visitors.



**October 14** In a 94-2 vote, the U.S. Senate adopts the Helms Amendment, which requires federally financed educational materials about AIDS to stress sexual abstinence and forbids any material that “promotes” homosexuality or drug use.

**November** Debra Fraser-Howze, director of teenage services at the Urban League of New York, founds the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS. The organization works to educate, mobilize, and empower black leaders to meet the challenge of fighting HIV/AIDS and other health disparities in their local communities.



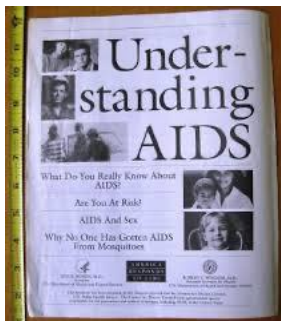
**November 13** The American Medical Association declares that doctors have an ethical obligation to care for people with AIDS, as well as for those who have been infected with the virus but show no symptoms.



The iconic image Silence=Death is created as a call to arms in the AIDS activist movement. [More.](#)

**1988**

**April** The first comprehensive needle-exchange program in North America is established in Tacoma, Washington. San Francisco then establishes what becomes the largest needle exchange program in the nation.



**May 26** The U.S. Surgeon General, C. Everett Koop, launches the U.S.'s first coordinated HIV/AIDS education campaign by mailing 107 million copies of a booklet, Understanding AIDS to all American households. It is the largest public health mailing in history.

**July 23** FDA announces that it will allow the importation of small quantities of unapproved drugs for persons with life-threatening illnesses, including HIV/AIDS.



**October 11** At the FDA headquarters, ACT UP protests the slow pace of the federal drug-approval process. Eight days later, FDA announces new regulations to speed up drug approvals.

**December 1** World AIDS Day is observed for the first time. The date is designated by WHO and supported by the UN.



**December 17** Sylvester, an openly gay African American entertainer considered to be “the embodiment of disco,” dies of AIDS-related illness at age 41.



**December 20** Max Robinson, the first African American network news anchor in the U.S., and a founder of the National Association of Black Journalists, dies of AIDS-related illness at age 49. [More.](#)



**December 27** Gay rights activist and writer Joseph Beam dies of an AIDS-related illness at age 33. He is best known for editing *In The Life*, the first collection of writing by gay Black men. [More.](#)



**1989**



**March 9** Photographer Robert Mapplethorpe dies of AIDS-related illness at age 42.

**June 16** Following NIH recommendations, the U.S. Public Health Service issues the first guidelines for preventing *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia, an AIDS-related opportunistic infection, and a major cause of illness and death for people living with AIDS.

**June 23** CDC releases the Guidelines for Prevention of Transmission of Human Immunodeficiency Virus and Hepatitis B Virus to Healthcare and public safety workers.

**August 18** CDC reports that the number of reported AIDS cases in the United States reached 100,000.



**June 23** Dr. Anthony Fauci, head of NIH's National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, endorses a "parallel track" approach to clinical trials, which will give a larger number of HIV-positive people access to experimental treatments. [More.](#)

**September 10-17** Members of 50 churches and mosques come together for the first Harlem Week of Prayer for the Healing of AIDS. The event is the brainchild of the Reverend Dr. Pernessa Seele, an African American immunologist and minister, who goes on to form The Balm, a nonprofit organization that works with black faith communities to improve health.



**December 1** African American choreographer and activist Alvin Ailey dies at age 58 of an AIDS-related illness. In 2014, President Barack Obama awarded Ailey a posthumous Presidential Medal of Freedom—the nation’s highest civilian honor.

## 1990

**January 18** CDC reports the possible transmission of HIV to a patient through a dental procedure performed by an HIV-positive dentist. This case provokes much public debate about the safety of common dental and medical procedures.

**January 26** The U.S. Public Health Service issues a statement on managing occupational exposure to HIV, including considerations regarding post-exposure use of the antiretroviral drug, AZT.



**February 16** Prolific artist and AIDS activist Keith Haring dies of AIDS-related illness at age 31.

**April 8** Ryan White, the Indiana teen who became an international spokesperson against HIV/AIDS stigma and discrimination, dies of AIDS-related illness at the age of 18.

**May 21** ACT UP protests at the NIH. The group demands more HIV treatments and the expansion of clinical trials to include more women and people of color. [More.](#)

**July 26** The U.S. Congress enacts the Americans with Disabilities Act. The Act prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities, including people living with HIV/AIDS.

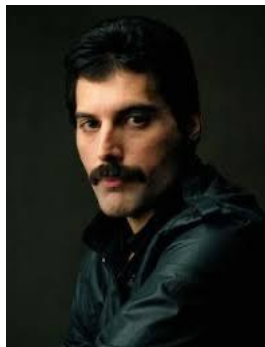
**1991**



**April-May** The Visual AIDS Artists Caucus launches the Red Ribbon Project to create a visual symbol to demonstrate compassion for people living with AIDS and their caregivers. The red ribbon becomes the international symbol of AIDS awareness.



**November 7** American basketball star Earvin “Magic” Johnson announces that he is HIV-positive.



**November 24** Freddie Mercury, lead singer and songwriter of the rock band Queen, dies of AIDS-related illness at age 45.

**1992**

AIDS became the number one cause of death for U.S. men ages 25 to 44.

**February 4** The International Olympic Committee rules that athletes with HIV are eligible to compete in the games without restrictions.



**April 8** Arthur Ashe, the former United States Open and Wimbledon tennis champion and an African American pioneer in sports and social issues, announces that he has AIDS. Ashe, who underwent heart-bypass surgeries in 1979 and 1983, believes he contracted HIV via blood transfusions. He died of AIDS-related illness on February 3, 1993.

**May 11** The U.S. District Court in Manhattan declares that the Helms Amendment (1987) is unconstitutionally vague. This act requires federally financed educational materials about AIDS to stress sexual abstinence and forbids any material that “promotes” homosexuality or drug use.

**May 27** FDA licenses a rapid HIV diagnostic test kit which gives results from a blood test in ten minutes.

## 1993

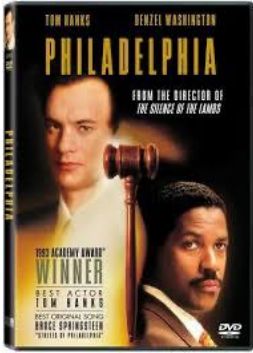


January 6: World-renowned ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev dies of AIDS-related illness at age 54.

**April 13** *Angels in America*, Tony Kushner’s two-part play about AIDS, wins the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

**May 7** FDA approves the female condom.

**December 18** CDC expands the case definition of AIDS, declaring those with CD4 counts below 200 to have AIDS.

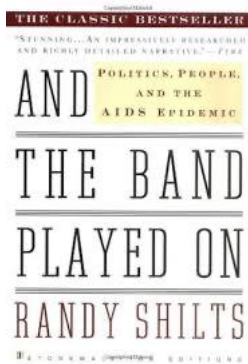


**December 22** The film *Philadelphia*, starring Tom Hanks as a lawyer fired from his job because he has AIDS, opens in theaters. Other earlier films, including the documentary *No Sad Songs* (1985), *Buddies* (1985), *An Early Frost* (1985), and *Longtime Companion* (1989), have addressed AIDS, but *Philadelphia* is the first major Hollywood film on the topic. Hanks will win his first Academy Award for Best Actor for his role.

**1994**



In this year, AIDS becomes the leading cause of death for all Americans ages 25 to 44.



**February 17** Randy Shilts, a journalist who covered the AIDS epidemic and who authored *And the Band Played On: Politics, People and the AIDS Epidemic*, dies of AIDS-related illness at age 42.

**November 11** Pedro Zamora, a member of the cast of MTV's popular television show *The Real World*, dies of AIDS-related illness at age 22.

**December 23** FDA approves an oral HIV test, the first non-blood-based antibody test for HIV.



## 1995



**February 23**      **Olympic gold medal diver Greg Louganis discloses** he has AIDS.

**June**            FDA approves the first protease inhibitor. This ushers in a new era of highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART)—a pivotal long-term treatment for the virus.

**July 14**      CDC issues the first guidelines to help healthcare providers prevent opportunistic infections in people infected with HIV.

The National Academy of Sciences concludes that syringe exchange programs should be regarded as an effective component of a comprehensive strategy to prevent infectious disease.

**October 31**      500,000 cases of AIDS had been reported in the U.S. In this year, the number of new AIDS cases diagnosed in the U.S. declines for the first time since the beginning of the epidemic.

## 1996

**May 14**      The first HIV home testing and collection kit is approved.

**June 3**      A viral load test, which measures the level of HIV in the blood, is launched



**October**      AIDS quilt is displayed in its entirety.  
More.

**December 6**      President Clinton hosts the first White House Conference on HIV/AIDS.

**December 30**      TIME Magazine names HIV/AIDS researcher Dr. David Ho as its “Man of the Year” for his work on highly active antiretroviral therapy. Ho advocates for a new strategy of treating HIV – “hit early, hit hard,” in which patients are placed on new, more aggressive treatment regimens earlier in the course of their infection in hopes of keeping them healthier for a longer period.

## 1997

In response to the call to “hit early, hit hard,” highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) becomes the new standard of HIV care.

The CDC report the first substantial decline in AIDS deaths in the United States. Due largely to the use of HAART, AIDS-related deaths in the U.S. decline by 47% compared with the previous year.

**September 26** FDA approves a combination of two antiretroviral drugs in one tablet, which makes it easier for people living with HIV to take their medications.

## 1998

In this year, highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART ) becomes the new standard of HIV care.

CDC reports the first substantial decline in AIDS deaths in the United States. Due largely to the use of HAART, AIDS-related deaths in the U.S. decline by 47% compared with the previous year.

UNAIDS estimates that 30 million adults and children worldwide have HIV, and that, each day, 16,000 people are newly infected with the virus.

As a greater number of people begin taking protease inhibitors, resistance to the drugs becomes more common, and drug resistance emerges as an area of grave concern within the AIDS community.

CDC reports that African Americans account for 49% of U.S. AIDS-related deaths. AIDS-related mortality for African Americans is almost 10 times that of whites and three times that of Hispanics.

**April 20** HHS Secretary Donna Shalala determines that needle-exchange programs are effective and do not encourage the use of illegal drugs.

**April 24** CDC issues the first national treatment guidelines for the use of antiretroviral therapy in adults and adolescents with HIV.

**October** President Clinton declares AIDS to be a “severe and ongoing health crisis” in African American and Hispanic communities in the U.S. He announces a package of initiatives aimed at reducing the impact of HIV/AIDS on racial and ethnic minorities.

## 1999

WHO announces that HIV/AIDS has become the fourth biggest killer worldwide and the number one killer in Africa. The organization estimates that 33 million people are living with HIV worldwide, and that 14 million have died of AIDS.

**May** Activist Phill Wilson founds the Black AIDS Institute. The Institute's mission is "to stop the AIDS pandemic in Black communities by engaging and mobilizing Black institutions and individuals in efforts to confront HIV." Its motto: "Our People, Our Problem, Our Solution."

**December 10** CDC releases a new HIV case definition to help state health departments expand their HIV surveillance efforts and more accurately track the changing course of the epidemic.

## 2000

**January 10** The UN Security Council meets to discuss the impact of AIDS on peace and security in Africa. This marks the first time that the Council discusses a health issue as a threat to peace and security.

**April 30** The Clinton Administration declares that HIV/AIDS is a threat to U.S. national security.

## 2001

**February 7** The first annual National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day in the U.S took place.

**April 23** General Colin Powell, the newly appointed U.S. Secretary of State, reaffirms the U.S. statement that HIV/AIDS is a national security threat.

**June 25-27** The UN General Assembly holds its first Special Session on AIDS (UNGASS) and passes the UNGASS Declaration of Commitment.

HRSA begins focusing on individuals with HIV who know their status and are not receiving HIV-related services. HRSA instructs its grantees to address this population's "unmet need" for services.

CDC announces a new HIV Prevention Strategic Plan to cut annual HIV infections in the U.S. by half within five years.

(END October 2020)