



## World AIDS Day Report Shows Many Companies Failing HIV Workers

By 365gay.com

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NEW YORK CITY -- Lambda Legal released its seventh World AIDS Day Report Card today, failing companies and agencies that discriminate while praising organizations who fight misinformation and discrimination against people with HIV and AIDS.

The Report Card singles out companies, government agencies, advocacy organizations and health care providers for how they dealt with HIV issues over the last year, and provides specific steps they can take to treat people with HIV fairly and help end bias and stigma.

"This year's Report Card shows that the landscape for people with HIV is still quite mixed. There are some definite high points, but an alarming number of people with HIV still don't have equal opportunities at work or access to health care -- including from some companies and government agencies that should know better and badly need to improve," said Hayley Gorenberg, Director of Lambda Legal's AIDS Project.

Two Texas organizations -- the Texas AIDS Network and AIDS Coalition Texas NOW! -- received some of the highest grades in the Report Card for fighting dramatic cuts the Texas Department of Health proposed to the state's AIDS Drug Assistance Program. The groups earned an "A" because their work kept the state from cutting anyone from the program, keeping thousands of Texans from losing medications they desperately need.

On the other end of the spectrum, Cirque du Soleil was one of two entities to earn an "F" in the Report Card. Cirque has admitted that it fired gymnast Matthew Cusick because he has HIV, but says that's not "discrimination." (story) Cirque du Soleil's management claims Cusick could have transmitted HIV to other performers or audiences at the show, despite a consensus from mainstream athletic groups that people with HIV should not be restricted from competing or performing.

As a result of its discrimination, Cirque du Soleil is facing mounting protests and public opposition nationwide. Lambda Legal's Report Card says Cirque du Soleil can improve its grade by adopting policies that reflect the facts about HIV transmission and treat employees fairly.

The U.S. State Department received a "D" in the Report Card because of its refusal to change a decades-old policy that prohibits the Foreign Service from hiring anyone with HIV. (story) The current policy, while allowing Foreign Service members to retain their jobs if they test positive, does not factor in new applicants' qualifications or health status if they have HIV.

"Many employers still don't understand that people with HIV can pursue careers beyond desk jobs," said Jonathan Givner, AIDS Project Staff Attorney for Lambda Legal. "Employers like Cirque du Soleil and the U.S. State Department are basing their employment decisions on inaccurate information and myths about HIV. As people with HIV continue reentering the workforce in greater numbers, employers need to act reasonably and responsibly and base their policies on medicine and science rather than fear."

The World AIDS Day Report Card also highlighted groups working to prevent the spread of HIV. San Francisco's Stop AIDS Project earned an "A" for standing up to the federal government and several members of Congress when they demanded it stop presenting educational programs explicitly targeted at audiences who are at high risk for HIV infection. Similarly, the Hispanic Federation's Latino Commission on AIDS received an "A" for its critical grassroots AIDS education in Latino communities that have led to greater awareness about the increase in HIV infections among Latinos.

"Especially now, as we see disturbing trends in the spread of the disease, everyone needs to know the facts about HIV and

AIDS," Gorenberg said. "The Stop AIDS Project and the Latino Commission on AIDS have found effective ways to reach communities and help curb the spread of HIV. They're models for other groups doing this work."

The Report Card also addresses the critical issue of access to health care for people with HIV. Several nursing homes in Louisiana that refused to care for a stroke victim upon learning that he has HIV received an "F" on the Report Card. (story) By adopting policies that explicitly allow patients with HIV access to their services, the nursing homes could earn a higher grade, Lambda Legal said.

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