Watch Bodies and Coffins Pile Up in Protest Against Cuts to HIV and Health Services

The symbolic die-ins and caskets represent the AIDS and LGBTQ-related deaths that'll result from health care funding cuts and layoffs.

May 2, 2025 By Trent Straube

Pallbearers in black carried one coffin after another—206 in total—and stacked them in the form of a morbid mountain in front of the Washington, DC, office of the U.S. Department of State, where Secretary of State Marco Rubio is headquartered. The action was the latest by AIDS advocates protesting the gutting of funding for global and national HIV funds and health programs.

Each casket represented 100,000 lives at risk, according to Health GAP, which organized the protest along with Housing Works and others. The coffins symbolize 20 million adults and children, mostly in Africa, who receive lifesaving HIV treatment thanks to the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the global HIV program launched in 2003 by President George W. Bush that had received support from every administration until the current Trump White House.

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Vital health care programs and research within the United States are also on the chopping block. In addition to the massive cuts and restructuring implemented in recent months, the proposed fiscal budget for 2026 slashes an additional $17.6 billion from funding for the National Institutes of Health and $3.59 billion from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, according to The Choice Agenda, a global HIV prevention forum. The proposal eliminates, among other programs, the Global Health Center and the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities.

And therefore advocates take to the streets. Last week, over 100 protesters converged on the steps of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) building and collapsed on the ground, as if dead, to represent the LGBTQ deaths that'll result from the extreme cuts to health department programs, grants and research. (See the video above or watch it on YouTube.)

The Trump administration has aggressively targeted programs that support diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), decimating services particularly helpful to minority and at-risk populations, including Latino and Black Americans, women, underinsured people and LGBTQ people.

Such die-ins and mock funerals hearken back to protests in the early decades of the AIDS epidemic—the 1980s and '90s. Those colorful, creative tactics by groups such as ACT UP not only effectively garnered attention but also brought about changes to policies and research protocols that eventually led to the development and rollout of lifesaving HIV treatment. They also furthered, one could argue, the advancement of health equity and human rights, including same-sex marriage equality and access to health care.

The Trump administration has turned its back on our community and other marginalized groups most at risk with the gutting of the State Department. NO MORE.We WILL keep fighting for access to lifesaving healthcare and programs NO MATTER WHAT. hrc.im/ProtectHealth

[image or embed]

— Human Rights Campaign (@hrc.org) April 17, 2025 at 6:17 PM

LGBTQ advocacy group Human Rights Campaign (HRC) spearheaded the health department die-in. “Every person here represents countless other stories. Countless lives. Countless possibilities,” said HRC’s senior public policy advocate Matthew Rose. “And as the federal government cuts funding—from research to housing, from mental health to Medicaid—we’re not just watching systems disappear. We’re watching lives disappear.”

The coffin protest was conceived by Peter Staley, an AIDS activist from the days of ACT UP who, in 1991, helped slip a giant condom over the house of conservative antigay Senator Jesse Helms, one of the most iconic AIDS protests of the time. (Read Staley’s recollection of the legendary action in his POZ blog post here.)

“The coffins we are carrying today represent the 20 million people whose lives have been put at risk by Elon Musk, the richest man in the world.” Staley said in the Health GAP release. “Does President Trump even realize his legacy will be the worst chapter in the AIDS crisis—a relaunching of the pandemic that adds millions of infections and avoidable deaths, just as we were in reach of ending it?”

“Marco Rubio presides over the collapse of one of the most successful global health programs in history,” added Charles King, CEO of Housing Works. “If the U.S. allows PEPFAR to crumble, history will not be kind. It will remember that we had the power to stop an epidemic from reigniting—and chose not to. We must fully restore PEPFAR and renew our commitment to global health and human dignity.”

Peter Staley on the March 2022 cover of POZ

Learn more about Staley and AIDS activism by reading this excerpt from his memoir Never Silent: ACT UP and My Life, which was printed in the March 2022 issue of POZ.

For more about the current budget crisis, click #Federal Funding and #PEPFAR. There, you'll see headlines such as "'Broad, Cruel and Devastating': AIDS United Responds to Trump's 2026 Skinny Budget Plans," "Your Medicaid Benefits Are Under Attack!" "Federal Cuts Imperil Collection of Data on HIV, Cancer, STIs and More," "Significant HHS Workforce Reduction and Restructuring Threaten the Nation's Fight Against Cancer" and "HIV Activists March in NYC to Protest 'Death by 1,000 Musk Cuts.'"

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