

# **The Observation of World AIDS Day in National, County, and City Traditions**

**By**

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World AIDS Day, observed annually on December 1, serves as a Global Day of Remembrance and awareness for people affected by HIV and AIDS. Established in 1988 by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the day unites communities, reduces stigma, honors those lost to the disease, and renews efforts to prevent transmission. In the United States, World AIDS Day is recognized nationally and locally through educational programs, public memorials, and community health initiatives. Santa Clara County and the City of Gilroy participate in this observance through public health campaigns, awareness events, and official proclamations.

The history of AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) begins in the late 20th century when doctors in Los Angeles, New York City, and San Francisco began to report unusual cases of pneumonia, Kaposi's sarcoma, and other rare infections among young gay men. In 1981, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published the first official notice of what would become known as AIDS in its *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. Initially, the cause was unknown, and the disease was referred to by several names, including GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency).

By 1983, researchers in France, led by Dr. Luc Montagnier at the Pasteur Institute, identified the virus responsible for the disease, which became known as Human Immunodeficiency Virus, or HIV. The virus attacks the body's immune system, specifically the CD4 cells (T cells), weakening the body's ability to fight infections. Without treatment, HIV progresses to AIDS, the most severe stage of infection. Since the start of the epidemic, more than eighty-five million people worldwide have been infected with HIV, and approximately forty million people have died from AIDS-related illnesses. In the United States alone, over 700,000 people have lost their lives to HIV/AIDS.

Public understanding of AIDS in the 1980s was shaped by both fear and activism. Widespread stigma surrounded those living with the disease, particularly gay men, intravenous drug users, and people of color. Activist groups such as ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) emerged to demand faster drug approval, improved care, and greater public awareness. The AIDS Memorial Quilt, created in 1987, became a powerful grassroots expression of remembrance, with each panel honoring an individual lost to

AIDS. The quilt has since grown into one of the largest community art projects in history and has been displayed across the country, including throughout California.

During this same period, music and celebrity activism played a significant role in raising awareness. The Live Aid concert in 1985, organized by Bob Geldof and Midge Ure, demonstrated how global broadcasts could unite millions for humanitarian causes and inspired future AIDS benefit events. The Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert for AIDS Awareness in 1992 brought global attention to the epidemic and raised millions for research and treatment. Artists such as Elton John, Madonna, and George Michael used their platforms to promote compassion and education, helping transform public perception of HIV/AIDS from fear to solidarity.

Governmental responses evolved gradually but steadily. The President's Commission on the HIV Epidemic (1987) and the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency (CARE) Act (1990) marked major policy milestones. The CARE Act, named for Ryan White a teenager from Indiana who contracted HIV through a blood transfusion continues to fund HIV care, treatment, and prevention programs across the United States. Public education campaigns such as "America Responds to AIDS," launched in 1987, helped change attitudes, emphasizing prevention, testing, and compassion.

By the late 1980s, the international community recognized the need for a coordinated global response. The World Health Organization's Global Program on AIDS, led by Dr. Jonathan Mann, established World AIDS Day in 1988, making it the first international health day declared by the United Nations. The inaugural theme, "Communication," reflected the urgent need to combat misinformation and stigma. Since then, UNAIDS has coordinated annual observances, each with a specific theme such as "Know Your Status" (2018) and "Equalize" (2022) to highlight prevention, treatment, and equality.

In the United States, World AIDS Day observances are supported by federal agencies such as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the CDC, and the White House Office of National AIDS Policy. The President traditionally issues a proclamation each year reaffirming the nation's commitment to HIV prevention, treatment, and research. Landmarks such as the White House and the U.S. Capitol are illuminated in red, symbolizing remembrance and hope. Communities across the country hold candlelight vigils, art exhibits, choral performances, and memorial walks, reflecting the continuing impact of the epidemic and the resilience of those affected.

In California, the observance of World AIDS Day is deeply rooted in public health and activism. The California Department of Public Health (CDPH), through its Office of

AIDS, leads awareness campaigns and funds local health departments for testing, outreach, and education. California was among the first states to establish comprehensive HIV/AIDS programs in the 1980s and continues to lead in prevention and care. Cities and counties across the state host events such as candlelight vigils, red ribbon campaigns, and educational forums, keeping awareness alive at the community level.

In Santa Clara County, HIV/AIDS awareness, and service provision date back to the early years of the epidemic. The County's Public Health Department partners with organizations such as The Health Trust, AACI (Asian Americans for Community Involvement), and the Billy DeFrank LGBTQ+ Community Center to host annual World AIDS Day events. These include remembrance ceremonies, red ribbon distributions, live music performances, and free HIV testing clinics.

According to Board of Supervisors meeting records, official proclamations recognizing December 1 as World AIDS Day have been adopted since the mid-1990s. In *Resolution No. BOS-14-11 (November 18, 2014)*, the Board reaffirmed December 1 as World AIDS Day and endorsed the "Getting to Zero" initiative committing to zero new HIV infections, zero deaths, and zero stigma. Later resolutions in 2020 and 2023 renewed this commitment and directed the Public Health Department to collaborate with community partners to expand PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) access, increase testing, and promote education throughout the county.

At the city level, the City of Gilroy has mirrored the county's commitment through official proclamations and civic participation. On November 27, 2017, then-Mayor Roland Velasco issued an official proclamation declaring December 1 as World AIDS Day in Gilroy, urging residents "to unite in compassion, awareness, and prevention." This act reaffirmed the city's support for public education and its solidarity with those affected by HIV/AIDS. Subsequent proclamations by the Mayor's Office have continued to align with the county's observance, often featuring participation by local schools, faith leaders, and community health advocates.

Gilroy's community observances have included candlelight vigils, educational exhibits, art displays, and music performances. The Gilroy Library and local nonprofits have hosted exhibitions about the AIDS Memorial Quilt, while community churches and civic organizations hold remembrance gatherings where residents light candles and share stories. Musical tributes by local choirs and youth groups symbolize hope and unity, connecting Gilroy's local reflection to a global movement.

Community health providers, including Gardner Family Health Network and Saint Louise Regional Hospital, participate in HIV awareness efforts by offering free testing and

distributing educational materials in both English and Spanish. Schools and youth programs engage students through poster contests and service-learning projects focused on health and compassion. Together, these community-based activities reinforce Gilroy's dedication to health, inclusion, and education.

World AIDS Day continues to hold profound civic and humanitarian significance. It connects global and local communities through remembrance, compassion, and the pursuit of public health equity. From the worldwide reach of Live Aid and the AIDS Memorial Quilt to the intimate candlelight vigils held in Gilroy, this observance reminds us of both the loss and resilience woven into the history of the epidemic. In Santa Clara County and throughout California, December 1 stands as a testament to shared humanity, scientific progress, and hope for a world free of HIV/AIDS.