

THE QUEER COMMUNITY ACTS UP

Isolated acts of protest in 1985 and 1986 along with increasingly combative reporting in gay publications indicated the mounting anger in the gay community. In early 1987 at a Center for Disease Control conference, a protest group calling itself the Lavender Hill Mob stormed the proceedings and shouted down the speakers. Avram Finkelstein's Silence=Death collective spread posters throughout New York City to foment expanded gay activism.

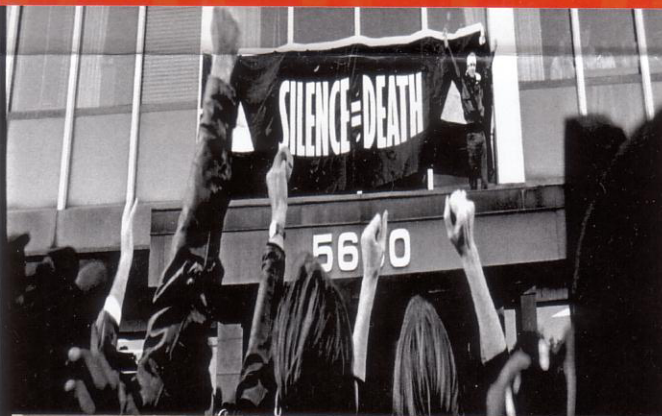
The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), which formed later that year in New York City, quickly became the face of the new activism. A primary target of the group concentrated on the non-availability of medications. Drugs identified as promising for AIDS treatment had not been fast-tracked for testing by the FDA. The sole drug available was a failed cancer drug that sold for thousands of dollars a year, and clinical trial protocols denied potential treatment to patients. Using civil disobedience, direct-action tactics, and media visibility, ACT UP put pressure on the FDA to expedite their work.

ACT UP became known for their disruptive protests, theatrical street demonstrations, and willingness to be arrested for their cause. At their height, they boasted chapters across America and spawned groups such as the artists collective Gran Fury, the militant Queer Nation, and the Treatment Action Group (TAG). TAG's medical expertise worked alongside ACT-UP's activism to reform the drug trial policies and speed the development of new drugs in the FDA. By 1996, advances in antiviral therapies allowed the disease to be largely managed and transformed it from the death sentence that it had been.



By the time President Reagan gave his first policy speech about AIDS in 1987, nearly forty thousand Americans had been diagnosed and over twenty thousand had died. That same year, Congress adopted an amendment banning funds for any AIDS education materials that "promote or encourage, directly or indirectly, homosexual activities." This effectively outlawed any federally funded education efforts to limit the spread of the virus.

Congress eventually approved legislation in 1988 that would define a comprehensive federal program to fight and treat AIDS. In 1990, the death of a hemophiliac teenager prompted the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resource Emergency (CARE) Act, which funded community-based care and treatment services. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 was the first federal law to offer protection against discrimination for those with HIV.



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175 Arrested in Confrontation

ACTIVISTS CLOSE FDA

All photos courtesy of Chuck Stallard, ACT UP/Los Angeles Records, ONE Archives at the USC Libraries.



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