

## THE DENVER PRINCIPLES: A cornerstone of HIV/AIDS History



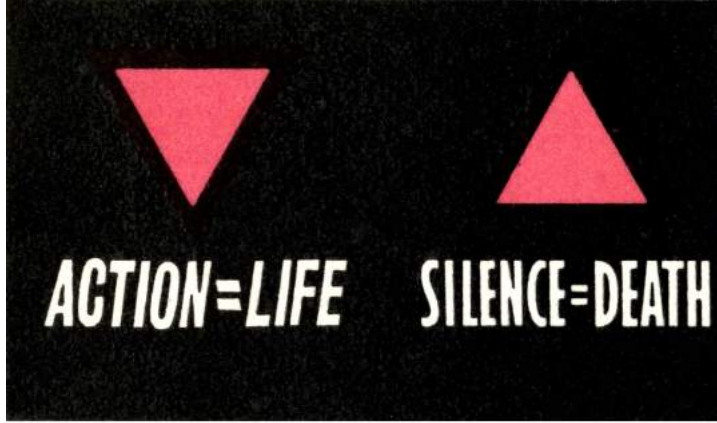
This flag series is in honor and recognition of The Denver Principles and the group of activist gay men from across the country who wrote them in a hotel in Denver in 1983 (all of whom were diagnosed with AIDS at the time). The project is a collaboration between artist [Heather Schulte](#), [Colorado Health Network](#) and the HIV+ individuals they serve, along with other Colorado-based organizations that support this community. Together, we discussed the document, and collected additional first-hand perspectives from those who have been living with HIV since the 80s and those who have been more recently diagnosed. Utilizing this multi-generational perspective, we designed the flags, and worked together to create them.





The main flag design is directly inspired by the original "Fighting for our Lives" banner, which was held by the men who presented The Denver Principles in 1983. As a group, we decided to include colored letters to signify the diversity of people who are now part of the HIV+ community, and are drawn from the inclusive Pride flag (created by [Daniel Quasar](#)), as well as other LGBTQ+ flags that express the spectrum of identities represented. The other side of the flag is in honor of the 40th anniversary of The Denver Principles, and is red and white to reference the colors of the original FFOL banner.





The additional, smaller flags are a series of colored triangles on black background, again referencing the spectrum of identity, and each is a representation of foundational tenets stated in The Denver Principles. During the summer of 2022, we discussed and studied the document with the HIV+ community, and created an [online survey](#) (as well as paper copies that we handed out at CHN and PRIDE events) to inform what concepts stood out. We then chose a series of words, and used those to design each flag. The triangles are inspired by ACT UP's iconic pink triangle protest poster, created by a collective of gay activists, including Avram Finkelstein.

We will be holding discussion panels during the exhibition period, as well as interactive flag making events during CHN's [Festival for Life 5k](#) on August 27, 2022. We are also in planning stages for a larger event next year, in June of 2023, as we celebrate the 40th anniversary of The Denver Principles. Additionally, we are working with David Duffield, a local historian and archivist with The Center on [Colfax's Colorado LGBTQ History Project](#), who will be conducting oral history interviews with anyone who is willing to share their experiences during the 80s/90s AIDS crisis, living with HIV, and the ongoing need for awareness, prevention, and de-stigmatization in Denver/Colorado. Please [get in touch](#) if you would like to participate in any of these events, or would like more information as events are scheduled!

## The History of The Denver Principles



Image courtesy of Richard Berkowitz

The Denver Principles is a manifesto declaring the rights people with AIDS, responsibilities of healthcare workers, and exhortations for all people. They were written and presented on June 12, 1983 at the Second National AIDS Forum, part of the Fifth Annual Gay and Lesbian Health Conference in Denver. This was the first instance of AIDS activism that brought together folks from across the nation, and the first time people who shared a disease in common organized to fight for their right to participate in political decision making and creating policy. They built upon the ongoing work of the feminist and Civil Rights movements, and shared principles that echo in the disabled, indigenous, immigrant and worker's rights actions for representation and fair treatment. This foundational document went on to shape international HIV/AIDS policy through the Paris Declaration and GIPA/MIPA Principles. In our current time, those who have experienced the most negative effects of COVID-19 are finding similar patterns repeating: families who have lost loved ones face grief in the midst of a society that largely wants to "move on," overworked, underpaid, under resourced, and under appreciated healthcare workers, and individuals now dealing with long-lasting and life-altering effects of Long COVID (or economic impacts from sickness).

## **The Document:**

### **THE DENVER PRINCIPLES**

(Statement from the advisory committee of the People with AIDS)

We condemn attempts to label us as "victims," a term which implies defeat, and we are only occasionally "patients," a term which implies passivity, helplessness, and dependence upon the care of others. We are "People With AIDS."

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ALL PEOPLE**

1. Support us in our struggle against those who would fire us from our jobs, evict us from our homes, refuse to touch us or separate us from our loved ones, our community or our peers, since available evidence does not support the view that AIDS can be spread by casual, social contact.
2. Not scapegoat people with AIDS, blame us for the epidemic or generalize about our lifestyles.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PEOPLE WITH AIDS**

1. Form caucuses to choose their own representatives, to deal with the media, to choose their own agenda and to plan their own strategies.
2. Be involved at every level of decision-making and specifically serve on the boards of directors of provider organizations.
3. Be included in all AIDS forums with equal credibility as other participants, to share their own experiences and knowledge.
4. Substitute low-risk sexual behaviors for those which could endanger themselves or their partners; we feel people with AIDS have an ethical responsibility to inform their potential sexual partners of their health status.

### **RIGHTS OF PEOPLE WITH AIDS**

1. To as full and satisfying sexual and emotional lives as anyone else.
2. To quality medical treatment and quality social service provision without discrimination of any form including sexual orientation, gender, diagnosis, economic status or race.
3. To full explanations of all medical procedures and risks, to choose or refuse their treatment modalities, to refuse to participate in research without jeopardizing their treatment and to make informed decisions about their lives.
4. To privacy, to confidentiality of medical records, to human respect and to choose who their significant others are.
5. To die—and to LIVE—in dignity.

Michael Callen, a person living with AIDS, shared his experience as a person diagnosed with AIDS during a speech presented to the New York Congressional Delegation in May 1983. Hon. Geraldine A. Ferraro was so moved by his words, that she read them on the floor of the House, thus entering them into the *Congressional Records*. His first-hand account details much of the context behind the need for The Denver Principles, why they were written, and much of which is sadly still pertinent today.

The Denver Principles' writers were a coalition of activist gay men from both San Francisco and New York City, who were diagnosed with AIDS. Frustrated with the lack of clear information and expertise available about their illness, they decided to meet in Denver at the conference. Bobbi Campbell, one of the first people to be diagnosed with AIDS in the US, Dan Turner, and Bobby Reynolds came from SF after holding the first AIDS candlelight march, led by the "Fighting For Our Lives" banner which became the motto for the AIDS movement. They were the founding members of the SF AIDS Foundation. Richard Berkowitz and Michael Callen, founders of Gay Men with AIDS, and outspoken proponents of safe sex (essentially the first instance of sex education), traveled from New York City along with Artie Felson, Matthew Sarnier, Phil Lanzaratta, Bill Burke, Bob Cecchi, Tom Nasrallah,. They were joined by "Gar Traynor from Los Angeles, someone named Elbert from Kansas City, and another PWA from Denver whose name has been lost to history." (source) Some in this group went on to found People With AIDS (PWA) organizations (coalitions) that year, later becoming the National Association of People With AIDS in 1987.



Image courtesy of Richard Berkowitz

These men met at the Executive Tower Inn, now the Curtis Hotel Denver located at 1405 Curtis St downtown, to share their experiences combating stigma and advocating on behalf of other people living with and at risk for HIV/AIDS (PLWHA). This discussion led to drafting the Denver Principles, which they presented at the end of the conference. The delegation from San Francisco brought the "Fighting for our Lives" banner, which was as the group stormed the stage prior to keynote speaker Ginny Apuzzo, and each of the 11 men read a portion of the document to the crowd.

From *The Washington Blade*, June 17, 1983, p 11, (archived [here](#)):

The presence of the men with AIDS helped to keep the focus of the conference sharply on AIDS. The dramatic highlight of the weekend came Sunday when 11 of the men made a formal presentation to the group, just before [Virginia] Apuzzo's closing speech.

Standing behind a large, four foot by 20 foot banner inscribed with the words "Fighting for Our Lives," the men talked of their experiences together that weekend, noting that the most important part was the chance to be with so many other people with AIDS, an opportunity one man described as "an amazing, uplifting experience."

"I have a bond with these men that I can share with no one else," said Bobbi Campbell of San Francisco, who added that the men had participated in "a group hug" the night before "that went on for 20 minutes."

Another person with AIDS, Bill Burke of New York, told the Gay health professionals that "coming out was one tribute to the magnificence of the human spirit" and that now "we (those with AIDS) have an even bigger challenge."

"One message we can leave with you," Burke said, referring to the efforts of AIDS patients themselves and others to respond to the AIDS crisis, "is that something very positive can come out of all this suffering."

Following the remarks, the people with AIDS took turns reading from a 17 point statement of the rights and responsibilities of all those touched by the AIDS epidemic.

The AIDS presentation concluded with a powerful "guided visualization" by Bob Reynolds, a person with AIDS from San Francisco. Speaking in a slow, barely controlled tones (sic), Reynolds asked those present to close their eyes and to fantasize that the love beating within them was reaching out first to quell their pain and then to join with the love of the others in the room before finally flowing outside to encompass all those—including the government—who deal with AIDS. By the time Reynolds brought his fantasy to an end, there were few, if any, with dry eyes in the room.

From Michael Cullen and Dan Turner, writing for *Body Positive Magazine*:

There wasn't a dry eye in the house, as a *Washington Blade* account of the event noted. Keynote speaker Ginny Apuzzo had to wait 10 minutes to permit the audience to recompose itself before proceeding. The theme of the Second National AIDS conference had been "Health Pioneering in the Eighties." Ginny, faced with the daunting task of following our emotionally devastating presentation, opined that if those health care providers in attendance were the health care pioneers, then those of us with AIDS were truly the trailblazers.



Image courtesy of Richard Berkowitz

It has been stated over and over again, in many interviews, articles, books, etc., since 1983, that this document has been foundational to codifying into law rights to health privacy, non-discriminatory practices, and information disclosure that from which everyone now benefits. In the midst of another, ongoing, international health crisis, it is timely to revisit not only this document and its statements, but also the collaborative leadership and self-empowerment this group of gay men demonstrate, alongside a diverse group of women, people of color, and anti-capitalist activists. Just a few years prior, the "Gang of 19" had protested the lack of accessibility in local public transportation, mere blocks from the Executive Tower Inn/Curtis Hotel. Denver has a strong history of activism, which this project aims to highlight and continue, especially in light of our current COVID-19 crisis.



Much more information about the Principles, its writers, and AIDS history can be found via these links:

Interview with Dr Larry Mass, who covered the AIDS pandemic early on and wrote the very first article about it in an LGBTQ+ newspaper called the *New York Native* on May 18, 1981:

<https://www.thebody.com/article/larry-mass-earliest-hiv-aids-news-coverage>

This NPR link shows the article he wrote:

<https://www.npr.org/2021/05/23/996272737/skepticism-of-science-in-a-pandemic-isnt-new-it-helped-fuel-the-aids-crisis>

“Only Your Calamity: The Beginnings of Activism by and for People With AIDS”

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3780739/>

“How ‘The Denver Principles’ Changed Healthcare Forever”

<https://www.poz.com/blog/how-the-denver-princ>

CPR Interview with Richard Berkowitz, August 2018:

<https://www.cpr.org/show-segment/the-founding-principles-of-aids-activism-were-created-not-in-new-york-or-san-francisco-but-denver/>

Article on the National Forum on AIDS in *Gay Community News*, July 9, 1983, p1:

<https://repository.library.northeastern.edu/files/neu:m046hs08d>

Sean Straub, founder of POZ magazine, on why The Denver Principles are still relevant:

<https://www.poz.com/article/renewing-denver-principles>

Online exhibition about AIDS activism in the Bay Area:

<https://www.glbthistory.org/aids-treatment-activism>

Cliff Morrison, nurse at ward 5B at San Francisco General Hospital, about caring for AIDS patients, which came to be known as the San Francisco Model of Care:

<https://www.jnj.com/personal-stories/ward-5b-how-one-nurse-revolutionized-patient-care-during-the-aids-crisis>

More on the SF Model of Care:

<https://scienceofcaring.ucsf.edu/patient-care/unbroken-chain-three-decades-hiv-aids-nursing>

5B documentary film about the first AIDS ward in the US:

<https://5bfilm.com/>

Fiasco podcast, Season 5, details the AIDS epidemic:  
<https://www.prologueprojects.com/shows>

We Were Here documentary:  
<https://wewereherefilm.com/>

"Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt" documentary about the NAMES Project  
AIDS Memorial Quilt:  
<https://www.criterionchannel.com/common-threads-stories-from-the-quilt>