

## PLEASE CONSIDER SIGNING ON IN SUPPORT

### Community Advocates at #CROI2024 Condemn Appalling Behavior by Hundreds of Opening Plenary Attendees

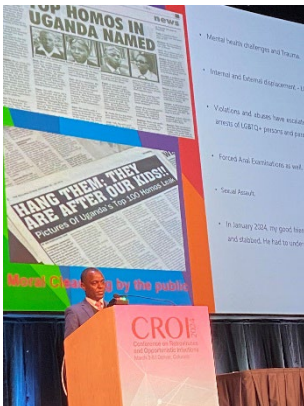
Date: March 6, 2024

To: The CROI Foundation, IAS-USA, and the CROI Scientific Planning Committee, including the Community Liaison Subcommittee

From: The Community Educator Scholars and Mentors on behalf of Community Advocates

Re: The behavior of hundreds of #CROI2024 registrants during the March 3 opening plenary

The opening plenary of the Conference on Retrovirus and Opportunistic Infections (CROI) features the most prestigious invited talks of the meeting given by highly notable experts. This year's opening plenary at CROI, which took place Sunday evening March 3 in Denver, Colorado, included talks from Dr. Barney S. Graham, who spoke about modern vaccinology and the legacy of HIV research, and Dr. Dorothy Mboir-Ngacha, who reflected on ending pediatric HIV.



The final talk of the opening, the “Martin Delaney Presentation” which highlights community voices, was given by Dr. Frank Mugisha, a world-renowned LGBTQ rights activist from Uganda, who focused on battling deadly homophobia and laws that criminalize LGBTQ people in Uganda and around the world, including the United States.

Dr. Mugisha delivered a remarkably powerful and timely talk, which elicited a standing ovation from the audience. Sadly, the audience was significantly smaller than the audience for the other lectures. When it was Dr. Mugisha's turn to speak, hundreds of researchers at the foremost scientific HIV conference in the world got out of their chairs, turned around, and walked out.

As members of the CROI Community Educator Scholars and Mentors, who officially represent community at CROI, we are appalled at the actions of these hundreds of HIV researchers. Their behavior was shameful, unprofessional, and unacceptable. The message they sent was one of disdain and contempt for the community of people directly impacted by HIV. Their message was also homophobic and deeply stigmatizing.

These researchers are well aware of the disproportionate burden of HIV on gay and bisexual men, other men who have sex with men, and transgender individuals in every part of the world. Yet they could not be bothered to give 20 minutes of their time to listen to Dr. Mugisha, one of our world's top activists who risks his life daily to fight back against homophobia, homo-hatred, and trans-hatred.

We call out the crude and obvious hypocrisy of people who make careers off of our lives and bodies, who may even call for equal rights and equity in slick PowerPoint presentations, who may “perform” community engagement, but simply can’t be bothered to hear what we have to say, even when our lives and wellbeing are so intensely threatened and we so desperately need our allies to show up.

We call on CROI to clearly and unequivocally condemn this appalling lack of respect for community lives.

We demand a direct apology to Dr. Frank Mugisha.

We ask that the Martin Delaney Presentation be scheduled as the first or second talk of the opening plenary, not the last talk. We are certain hundreds of people would not have walked out on Drs. Graham or Mboi-Ngacha. It feels heartbreaking to require a structural intervention to get people to listen, but we will be heard. We will not be ignored. We will not be disrespected.

HIV research is not possible without community. We are the most important part of the entire endeavor to end HIV. We demand the respect we are entitled to as human beings.

Silence equals death.

PLEASE CONSIDER SIGNING ON IN SUPPORT OF THIS STATEMENT.

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Thank you!