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John McDonald

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Bill Venuti, Trustee, left, and Ken Rapkin, Executive Director of The Campbell Foundation. Photo by J.R. Davis.

Fort Lauderdale is home to one of the top funding HIV/AIDS philanthropic organizations worldwide.

In its annual report, Funders Concerned About AIDS ([FCAA](#)) ranked the [Campbell Foundation](#) 80th out 392 global HIV/AIDS organizations.

“We’re sitting in the epicenter of new infections,” said Ken Rapkin, Campbell Foundation Executive Director.

Rapkin spoke to SFGN via telephone on a January morning in South Florida. A popular tourist destination, Florida is also a state with one of the highest populations of people living with HIV/AIDS.

In 2016, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control reported 39,660 diagnoses of HIV infection in the United States. Of that number, Florida accounts for 4,972 cases.

“People kind of have this idea that AIDS is over,” said Rapkin. “That it’s a done deal and all you have to do is take a pill and it’s a lot like diabetes.”

That is a foolish assumption, said Rapkin, who added that some have grown weary of the struggle.

“Older gay men are burned out from it,” Rapkin said.

Still, for 23 years, the Campbell Foundation has endured in its mission to fund HIV research and provide better treatments. In FCAA’s newest funding report the Campbell Foundation surpassed the Wells Fargo Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, Coca-Cola Foundation, GlaxoSmithKline, the Knight Family Foundation and Keith Haring Foundation just to name a few.

In 2016 the Campbell Foundation awarded 17 grants totaling \$376,646.

Some of the money is distributed in what Rapkin calls end of the year “holiday hugs.” Recent beneficiaries include the Poverello Center, Latinos Salud, AH Monroe, AIDS Service Association of Pinellas, Broward House, Children’s Diagnostic & Treatment Center, FoundCare, McGregor Clinic, SunServe and [Tuesday’s Angels](#).

Rapkin said grant requests are thoroughly vetted by the board of directors and a peer review panel. The assistance of volunteers has played a big part in the foundation’s longevity, Rapkin said.

“We are not top heavy,” Rapkin said. “We do not pay consulting fees and a lot of our researchers work for free.”

While researchers still hunt for a cure, providing better treatment options for those living with the virus is an important part of the Campbell Foundation’s mission. Rapkin said HIV infection is “not good for the body” and while the funerals may not be happening as frequently, a new generation is grappling with issues such as premature aging and inflammation of internal organs causing osteoporosis and heart disease.

“AIDS is not over,” Rapkin said.

What is over is the White House’s watchdog group. When asked about the recent [firings](#) which completely gutted the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS, Rapkin said he was not surprised.

“Every President does this,” Rapkin said. “They want their own people in there.”

The Trump Administration has yet to show its hand on how it will deal with HIV/AIDS. The White House hung a red ribbon for last year's World AIDS Day, but President Trump has yet to disclose his strategy. Rapkin said he fears advancements made during the Obama and Bush administrations — such as PrEP and [PEPFAR](#) — will be stopped by a “pray it away” philosophy often deployed by Vice President Mike Pence.

“Do they replace them (advisory council) with competent people is the question,” Rapkin said.

<http://southfloridagaynews.com/Local/in-hiv-funding-fort-lauderdale-s-campbell-foundation-raises-profile.html>