21st-Century Fox

The new head of AIDS Action, the staid (some say stale) lobby group for AIDS service organizations, promises congressional clout and fresh ideas. Doug Ireland goes inside the Beltway.

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AIDS Action, the lobby group that calls itself “the national voice on AIDS,” has a new executive director—and the fresh leadership comes not a moment too soon. Jamie Fox, 45, who currently directs the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC), will take the helm right after the November elections. Mario Cooper, a leading African-American PWA activist and former AIDS Action board chair, says that under previous director Daniel Zingale, who left in January, the group “was trying to be an extension of the Human Rights Campaign,” with its go-along-to-get-along mentality. He calls the appointment of Fox “very exciting.”

Clearly, Fox is superbly positioned to make the DC-based group—which represents 3,200 AIDS service organizations (ASOs)—a more effective advocate. A decade ago, as a young, openly gay staffer for New Jersey’s Governor Jim Florio, Fox was credited by local activists with playing a key role in passing that state’s gay rights law. In Washington, he knows both the House and Senate well, having worked for years for then-representative, now-senator Robert Torricelli (D-NJ), rising to become the pugnacious solon’s chief of staff. Named by the Capitol Hill newspaper Roll Call as one of the “50 most influential congressional staffers,” he has run the DSCC for its chair, Torricelli, and is the man who passes out the campaign cash. As a result, he can get any Democratic senator—and many Republicans—on the phone in a flash. And Fox knows AIDS issues well from his two-year stint on the AIDS Action board and his work on HIV-related legislation. (When asked his own HIV status, Fox declined comment, citing his belief in the right to health privacy.)

High on Fox’s list of priorities for AIDS Action will be protecting health care records so insurance companies can’t discriminate, boosting prevention funding and working with under-represented communities. “We need to coalesce with the Congressional Black Caucus, the NAACP and a lot of others,” Fox says. “I feel very strongly that AIDS Action must go beyond just fighting for Ryan White funding. We need to join the fight for universal health care. We shouldn’t be fighting with other organizations for a piece of the same pie, but for a larger pie.”

Fox says that “broadening the agenda means that we have a moral responsibility to speak out on the pandemic in Africa.” He agrees with the call by Ana Oliviera, the director of New York City’s Gay Men’s Health Crisis, for ASOs to return to their activist roots, focusing more on mobilizing their

clients for needed policy changes. “I want to make sure that we can generate calls not just to Congress but to state legislatures,” he says.

While AIDS Action has had success in lobbying for Medicaid coverage expansion and continuation of disability benefits for people returning to work, some advocates have criticized it for concentrating too narrowly on securing federal funding for its member groups. Not only was AIDS Action missing in action during the fight (still only partly won) to end the administration’s bullying of poor countries seeking to make or import cheap, generic AIDS drugs, it publicly criticized the activist demos that forced the White House to modify its position. And AIDS Action did precious little to get Congress to pass full funding for the Ricky Ray Hemophiliac Relief Act, which partially recompensed the surviving 6,000 Americans—of the original 10,000—who were infected in the 1980s by contaminated blood under government supervision. One top Capitol Hill staffer says AIDS Action “hasn’t been very useful in mobilizing support on a lot of the AIDS initiatives we’ve been trying to pass.”

To those who worry that his background as a top Democratic operative might inhibit him from criticizing Al Gore if he wins, Fox says: “I’ve never shied away from a healthy fight. Most of the time I’ve had to fight people in my own party. I won’t be afraid to speak out if I think something’s wrong.”

With his résumé and access, Fox—like so many ex–Hill staffers—could have made a bundle in some lobby shop, but to his credit he’s put himself on the front line of the AIDS crisis. If he’s true to his word, AIDS Action could finally become more effective and independent of the establishment, which is what the epidemic demands.

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