# Action Zero

AIDS Action's ex-head blasts "The National Voice on AIDS" as a lobby that lip-services PWAs.

April 1, 2001 By Doug Ireland

---

When senior Democratic senate staffer Jamie Fox was named executive director of AIDS Action last year, many advocates hoped he would revivify the often-sluggish Washington lobby (see "21st-Century Fox," *POZ*, August 2000). Sadly, after meetings with the group's board, Fox resigned in December. This disappointing outcome should provoke an important debate about the direction not just of AIDS Action, but of AIDS advocacy in general. "I didn't seek the job -- the search committee came to me," Fox told *POZ* in an exclusive interview. "And, as an openly gay man, I was looking forward to putting my governmental experience to work on the AIDS crisis -- to giving something back." Fox had big plans to broaden the group's agenda beyond simply renewing Ryan White CARE Act funding (on which the 3,500 AIDS service organizations, or ASOs, that make up AIDS Action depend). He wanted the group to fight, too, for universal health care, for an effective national prevention campaign and for a response to the global AIDS crisis commensurate with our country's wealth.

His ideas immediately met resistance because, said Fox, "We've created a generation of AIDS execs who go from one organization to another, and some ASOs have become bloated, preoccupied with making sure their bureaucracies are well funded, rather than moving to the next level on how we battle the epidemic. Most ASO leaders do tremendous work," Fox continued, but some board members "are self-promoters. Like too many other nonprofits and movements, we've created a class of people who are mostly interested in preserving their revenue sources and status. For example, some of the largest ASOs mouth support for universal health care, but there's no real enthusiasm -- with universal health care, a lot of organizations would lose their bureaucracies."

Fox is hardly alone in identifying this problem -- openly gay Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA) sarcastically talks about "AIDS, Inc." And Fox is particularly critical of the undue influence on AIDS Action's board (composed mostly of ASO execs) wielded by the major urban-based ASOs -- dubbed the "Big Six," or "Divas." This group provides fully a quarter of AIDS Action's $2.2 million annual budget. A champion fund-raiser, Fox corralled more than $84 million as director of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee last year, helping to achieve the new 50/50 Senate split. This, he says, made the Divas "wary of me": Fox had planned to diversify the group's funding sources, and the Divas feared losing control.

Expanding the AIDS agenda, Fox says, means understanding that "Ryan White funding can't last

forever. It’s a battle every five years, and we’ve been lucky to keep increasing it. But if we face an economic downturn, these programs will attract more scrutiny. We can’t keep building bureaucracies with ever-increasing overheads and a narrow, self-preserving focus -- we’ll give ammunition to the right wing,” which is always looking for reasons to chop AIDS funds.

Eric Sawyer, of the activist Health Gap Coalition, agrees with Fox. “It’s unconscionable that AIDS Action, the most important national AIDS organization, is ignoring the global epidemic,” the longtime PWA said. “That group has dropped the ball on issues like prevention programs for minorities and needle exchange. Its preoccupation with maintaining the comfort of its Gang of Six needs to be rethought. Case in point: its exclusion of Housing Works [the New York City-based PWA housing organization where Sawyer once worked] from negotiations with the federal government because Housing Works has a tradition of direct action and class-action lawsuits. AIDS Action has become an old boys’ club. With Bush in office, it’ll have to be tough as nails -- which it hasn’t been in the last 10 years.”

Several AIDS Action board members echoed the words of Fred Miller, past executive director of DC’s Whitman-Walker Clinic, who said he was “mystified” by Fox’s comments. The board chose as Fox’s successor its own fund-raiser, Claudia French (she refused to be interviewed for this column). While many praise French’s administrative skills and commitment, her lack of political experience (previous post: fund-raiser for the Girl Scouts) leaves one wondering whether she can provide cutting-edge vitality for the lobby. When folks as different as savvy establishment-operative Fox and seasoned movement-militant Sawyer voice the same criticisms, it’s a sign that something is seriously wrong.

---

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Action-Zero-1149-8995