POTUS Priorities

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Presidental aids council member and PWA Judith Billings -- our woman with the inside scoop -- is waiting for a phone call from the Republicans. She wants to know if she still has a job.

The Bush administration hasn't done much to put its money or its mind where its mouth is on AIDS. It's still spinning after a high-level "Oops?" by White House Chief of Staff Andy Card, who told *USA Today* they'd be closing the Office of National AIDS Policy, then took it back when AIDSers like Billings kicked up a fuss. After a meeting of advocates with Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson -- who "recognized that he did have to have input from people in the field," Billings says -- the Dubya-ists decided to keep a reorganized office and the "AIDS Czar" position that heads it. But since then, there's been little action.

During the July meeting of the council -- a group of 35 docs, advocates and HIVers that is supposed to advise Thompson, who in turn briefs the president -- the administration released a statement claiming they would be appointing new members. No names have been put forward, and current members haven't been told whether or not they'll be invited back for another term. "I haven't heard anything since then," Billings says. The administration hasn't scheduled any meetings, either.

As for the appointment of czar Scott Evertz -- the highest ranking gay man in the Bush house and, of course, a Republican -- the vote is still out. "I think Scott is very concerned about the issues," Billings says. "But I haven't seen anything that would indicate he would do anything but say what he is told to say. The test will be how much freedom he is given to do what he wants. I'm afraid Evertz will stay with the party line." The party line, at this point, is focused on international funding, not any of the domestic needs the council crowed in its report (available at www.pacha.gov).

Still, Billings isn't quite ready to forsake the council if she's asked back. "Yeah, I'd stay," she says, "just to make sure this council isn't a toothless dragon." (Other than stay and fight, the only thing a council member can do to protest is resign.) "I do hope that what we're hearing from this administration is not just rhetoric," Billings says. Because even if it isn't, as she points out, what Bush is offering in the way of AIDS policy "is just a drop in the bucket compared to what the need is."

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