Shot in the Arm

Big Apple press sticks it to Rudy

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There was ink -- but little stink -- after a sensational *New York Observer* front-page headline alleged that New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani's office squashed a 37-page report that recommended funding for needle-exchange programs (NEPs). A leaked interoffice document urging city cash for sterile syringes had been kept in the closet by an election-year mayor famed for his zero-tolerance drug policy ("I don't think it's a good idea to give people needles in order to inject heroin," he has said). Giuliani denied the accusation. The citywide commissioner for AIDS policy, Erroll Chin-Loy, had an official "no comment" on what he termed a "touchy" subject.

Sources close to the mayor suggested that leaks like these may stall the strained NEP dialogue between Giuliani and advocates. And activists such as the National Coalition to Save Lives Now's Chris Lanier were shy about pointing fingers. "It's counterproductive to bash the mayor for suppressing the report, given the defensiveness of this administration," he said. "Giuliani said he'd hear arguments in favor of NEPs. That's a ray of hope." But Toni Perri, of Brooklyn's Moving Equipment Harm Reduction, doesn't see it quite that way: "People of color at risk for HIV and substance abuse -- Giuliani doesn't consider them a constituency."

In 1995, nearly half of all new AIDS cases in New York City were among injection drug-users (IDUs). The city has never funded the nine existing NEPs, which serve less than a quarter of the estimated 250,000 IDUs. The report, as quoted in the January 26 *Observer*, stated that with a $2.5-million shot in the arm, NEPs could prevent as many as 2,000 HIV infections and save as much as $54 million in Medicaid costs for new AIDS cases. GMHC's Ronald Johnson, director of the Office of AIDS Policy at the time of the report, declined to discuss the leak but was adamant about future action: "What the hell are they [city government] doing to address HIV transmission among IDUs? The answer is still nothing, and that's something they have to be held accountable for."

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