(Some) Republicans Get AIDS

Lobbyists should try working with Republicans before writing them off

February 1, 1995 By Chandler Burr

Here in Washington, where the Republican takeover of both the House and Senate is being evaluated minutely by every interest, the AIDS community is vocally worried about the next two years. The problem is, this is missing the point: True, Democrats have nothing to celebrate in the Hill's changed political landscape, but PWAs and those interested in AIDS policy need to realize not only that knee-jerk reactions could damage AIDS causes, but that the crisis may well be entirely illusory.

AIDS advocates are most concerned that funding of the Ryan White CARE Act—the primary source of funding for many AIDS services organizations—will be dramatically scaled back. Steve Gunderson, a gay Republican congressman from Wisconsin who will be involved in the Ryan White reauthorization battle, says many Republicans have worked on AIDS—including Rep. Dave Hobson (OH), who designed the Ohio AIDS program, Sen. Orrin Hatch (UT), Reps. Connie Morella (MD), John Porter (IL), Nancy Johnson (CT) and Rick Lazio (NY). "There are a number of us interested and committed," says Gunderson.

Federal prevention programs will be a harder sell. Hill-watcher Gary Rose says bluntly, "We've had North Carolina's Senator Jesse Helms putting anti-gay amendments in federal education bills that prohibit training in gay or AIDS issues, and that will probably escalate."

However, the Republican ascendancy opens strategies on state and local levels that may actually increase the number and scope of prevention programs around the country.

Gunderson mentions block granting. "Given that funding is a problem for every program in government today except social security, the question is how to provide the funds. The present system is strongly favored by many within the AIDS community because the funds go directly to them. Republicans usually favor block grants to states, and the states define the program, but if we want to fight off the Helms-type amendments saying, 'No money can be used for this or that program,' then you block grant money. The problem is that the present community wants to retain the present delivery system and at the same time have no restrictions. The only way I know to fight off the Far Right's limitation efforts is by saying, 'We will let Wisconsin decide the best system for Wisconsin, and New York for New York.' And then these programs will be free of restrictions, which means that prevention programs are up to local governments."

Mario Cooper, board chair of AIDS Action Council, the nation's leading AIDS advocacy lobbying group, sees it differently. "Our attitude right now is to wait and see. We do not have a clear picture of how the new Congress will respond to AIDS funding. There is a desire around Ryan White to review funding procedures and some interest exists in making block grants to states. We do know, historically, that block grants are not viewed favorably by community-based organizations," Cooper says. "The challenge is how to convince every member of Congress that the Ryan White funds are invested in their district. In regard to research, there's great concern about the supposed restrictions this Republican Congress would impose, as well as fear AIDS funding would shift to other diseases."

The challenge is: Can the AIDS community wean itself from the traditionally Democratic funding policy of direct federal monies and evolve a strategy for the Republican environment? Early signs are not encouraging. Several AIDS groups copied a Ryan White reauthorization lobbying letter to old-guard Democratic staffers, but not to their Republican counterparts. Joining forces with gay Republican groups, such as the Log Cabin Club (which has made Ryan White its top 1995 priority) could help avoid such oversights.

Steve Gunderson's message is one of practicality. "People need to develop strategies that can succeed within the existing environment, and I think it's essential that the AIDS community develop a relationship with moderate Republicans to successfully reauthorize Ryan White. If you come to Congress and say, 'Despite the sea change that has occurred we want to do business as usual,' you'll be disappointed. We are looking at no increases and probably a reduction, and Republicans are going to look more to spending cuts than to tax increases. A tax increase in this environment is truly unlikely. But, while there has been a traditional and successful working relationship between Democrats and AIDS activists, that doesn't preclude by any means a future successful relationship with Republicans."

In the end, it comes down to two observations, one made by National Association of Colored People with AIDS Director of Public Policy and Education, Cornelius Baker: "The gains we've made as a community have been through our advocacy, not from government leadership. What this now presents us with is again a way of redefining ourselves and our agenda and having to be much more sharply focused on it." Everything we got, we got the hard way. Nothing's changed. The other observation is by Gary Rose: "I think we're definitely in a different world. If we're going to learn how to serve the people we need to serve, we'd better learn how to live in that world."

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Some-Republicans-Get-AIDS-19569-1211