The HIV Beltway

AIDS PAC kicks off Washington lobby effort

April 1, 1994 By Fred Bimbler

The American AIDS Political Action Committee (AIDS PAC) represents a new step in the political battle over AIDS. Shifting from the grass-roots and activist movements to the more delicate art of Washington politics, the Washington, D.C.-based group represents a “maturing of the movement” according to its founder, Tom Sheridan. The formation of such an organization had been considered for several years but never actually put into place. Sheridan started AIDS PAC when it became clear to him that other broad-based PACs were unable to devote the energy required to address the specific political needs of the AIDS community.

AIDS PAC is staffed mostly with volunteers and is completely funded by private donors of diverse backgrounds. “As the number of AIDS cases increase in minorities, the poor and ethnic groups -- groups which are not traditionally well-represented in the political arena -- AIDS PAC will serve as their vehicle to bring the issues to the attention of their legislators,” says Donita Buffalo, AIDS PAC chair. “By educating the candidates on the real needs of the communities they represent, the group will be bringing a global concern back to the local level.”

AIDS PAC’s political program, to be officially implemented at a kick-off celebration this month, consists of candidate endorsement, campaign funding, voter education on the importance of AIDS as a political issue and candidate and incumbent education. Although efforts will be focused initially on areas with large populations living with HIV, the group hopes to reach rural areas in the near future. Within two years, the organization plans to administer a litmus test that will determine the candidates with the best AIDS policies.

Not everyone, however, is convinced of the necessity of having AIDS PAC.

“We’re so busy looking for short cuts, raising money, going to demonstrations, those are not the answers,” says Congressman Barney Frank (D-Mass.). “What we need is an organized, relentless grass-roots campaign. Write your congressman, call your congressman, get organized. In my view, AIDS PAC is not a necessary function and will not do a great deal of good.”

“I’m from the old school of letting a thousand flowers bloom; the more the merrier,” counters David Mixner, a Los Angeles-based public relations consultant. “Too many people worry if AIDS PAC will be the right way or the only way. My way or no way should not be the way we operate on

AIDS.”

“The established conservative groups are well-oiled, methodical machines with strong political arms. We intend to challenge them,” says Sheridan.

While AIDS PAC is a political newborn, it fully intends to catch up quickly. It will work with many of the national AIDS groups to help accomplish legislative implementation of AIDS policy.

“Where sound policy exists, we will try to give extra political support,” says Sheridan. “Most of the existing groups are forbidden to endorse candidates or engage in overt political activities because of their tax status. They develop very valuable policy, but they don’t have a great deal of political influence. AIDS PAC will be the muscle they need to break the political gridlock.”

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