The Way We Live Now: Dennis DeLeon

Latino Commision on AIDS

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The statistics -- Latinos make up 11 percent of the U.S. population but 20 percent of its AIDS cases -- don't fully communicate the impact of the pandemic among Latinos. Like a stone thrown into a pond, a single case of AIDS causes endless ripples in our barrios because extended families -- often including compadres/comadres (friends of the whole family), padrinos/madrinas (godparents) and others -- are a key part of our culture.

Ethnic diversity among Latinos has made it difficult to build a national presence to fight for resources. Leaders from the Cuban, Puerto Rican, Mexican American and other major Latino communities have yet to act as one in presenting the case for more funding for prevention and treatment.

This disunity was readily apparent last September when President Clinton unveiled a special $156 million fund designed to meet the AIDS emergency among blacks and "other minorities." In reality, virtually all the money goes to black groups. Did the Hispanic Congressional Caucus push the Congressional Black Caucus to include Latinos as part of the emergency? Did the caucus declare its own emergency among Latinos? No, the caucus did nothing. While we salute the Black Caucus for its effective fight for much-needed resources, I am deeply disappointed that Latino groups received no support from Clinton or Health Secretary Donna Shalala, who, without political pressure, are apparently unwilling to understand how intensely the epidemic is hitting Latinos.

The Latino community has so much knowledge and creativity that could be used to respond to AIDS -- how many new infections will it take before our leaders begin to use their inventiveness? We must use our long tradition of extended families to bridge divides of origin, gender and sexual orientation. If we remain disunited, we will never address the epidemic in our communities.

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