Waste Product

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It may mark the rekindling of the late ’80s “culture wars” against AIDS funding -- this time with the support of a few gay activists. That’s what some observers are saying about a trumpeted report released in February by a right-wing group calling for disbanding or cutting key federal HIV programs. Citizens Against Government Waste (CAGW), a well-heeled DC lobbying organization, released a lengthy report titled “AIDS Programs: An Epidemic of Waste” (see www.cagw.org), bringing “government efficiency” luster to a stance held by openly antigay groups such as the Family Research Council.

Noting that AIDS is only the 17th-highest cause of U.S. deaths, CAGW wrote: “Despite this, AIDS receives more funding than any other disease,” a problem it blamed on “highly mobilized lobbying forces.” These anti-lobbyist lobbyists called federal AIDS programs “rife with waste, fraud and abuse.” The report included cases of documented corruption and dubious Caribbean conferences by local AIDS service organizations (ASOs), largely based on research by gay ACT UP/DC activist Wayne Turner, who spoke at CAGW’s press conference. (“I did our movement justice in not embracing their conclusions,” he later told *POZ*.)

But the group reserved its most intense disdain for “pornographic prevention seminars” -- sexually explicit programs aimed at gay men -- that “do nothing to bring about an end to this dreaded disease.” Exhibit A was San Francisco’s Stop AIDS Project, which received $698,000 from the CDC last year, and ran safe-sex workshops like “Guywatch: Blow by Blow” [see "Sex Pistols," *POZ*, January 2002]. The CAGW report cited a November 2001 federal investigation sparked by a complaint from gay activist Michael Petrelis.

AIDS activists are particularly alarmed by CAGW’s statement that Title I of the Ryan White CARE Act, which distributes $619 million annually for HIV services such as nursing, dental and mental health care, “should be eliminated...because it fully duplicates” Medicaid and Medicare. “A flagrant lie,” countered Ernest Hopkins of Communities Advocating Emergency AIDS Relief, an ASO lobby group. Both Medicaid and Medicare, he noted, require HIVers to be disabled, not simply HIV positive. Plus, Hopkins said, “almost none of the services funded by Title I are covered by most states’ Medicaid programs.”

CAGW’s bottom line had an unusual twist. “Congress should redirect many CDC prevention grants to international AIDS relief” and vaccine research; eliminating Title I and HOPWA would free funds to “bolster the AIDS Drug Assistance Program.” Hopkins said, “They pit global AIDS support against domestic AIDS support...Their assumption is, if you destroy the AIDS service industry, you

destroy the gay community.”

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