What Dubya Stands For

Texas Gov. George W. Bush wimps out on AIDS

September 1, 1999 By Doug Ireland

Texas ranks fourth—behind New York, California and Florida—in the number of recorded AIDS cases, and five Texas cities (Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, Austin and Fort Worth) get emergency Ryan White Care Act funding. But as the state's chief executive with responsibility for public health, Texas Gov. George W. Bush—anointed by the punditocracy and pollsters as the all but inevitable Republican presidential nominee in 2000—has turned his back on AIDS.

Advocacy groups in Texas are unusually scathing. "AIDS? He's never uttered the word," sniffs Don Mason, executive director of AIDS Services of Dallas. "When we asked Bush to write a letter in support of our application for federal funding," says Tom Sheffield, HIV project director for the Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department, "we got back a letter saying he couldn't because then he'd have to write letters for the four other cities." Asked what kind of president Bush would make based on his Texas AIDS record, Harry Livesay, advocacy director of Houston's Bering-Omega Community Services Center, an AIDS service organization, warns, "I'd be scared."

A request to the governor's press spokesperson, Linda Edwards, for Bush AIDS statements yielded only a couple of anodyne letters to event organizers urging participants to "remember and pray" for people with HIV but devoid of any reference to AIDS as a public policy issue.

Despite Texas' steadily rising AIDS rate, state government spending—not just on AIDS, but on all sexually transmitted diseases—remained the same, a paltry $18.4 million, from 1991 until just this year, when the legislature approved an additional $18 million (and then only to secure federal matching funds). Worse, in January the Bush administration issued an order that all who test positive must have their names reported to the state health department, a decision widely criticized by AIDS groups as one that would scare people away from testing.

The man behind that order was Bush's health commissioner, Reyn Archer, MD, described as "a right-wing zealot" by Democratic State Rep. Debora Danburg, a straight gay-rights advocate whose district includes the Montrose area, Houston's largest gay enclave. "Bush passed over several well-qualified people to appoint Archer, who had very meager public health credentials," says Danburg. "Archer has a lot of bizarre theories—he's opposed not only to abortion but to condoms and other birth control because 'it's not what God intended.'" Archer last year proposed

cutting off all state funds for public school–based health clinics, which would have effectively eliminated already-weak school HIV education programs. (The legislature kept the funding.) Indeed, Archer's main qualification for the job was that he was acceptable to the Christian right—and is the son of U.S. Rep. William Archer, an arch-reactionary GOP powerhouse.

Bush's campaign theme of "compassionate conservatism" is empty rhetoric that, says Francisco Sanchez, the openly gay secretary of the Harris County Democratic Party, "translates into a kinder, gentler form of racism. Despite soaring AIDS rates among Hispanics, especially women, assistance from the state has dropped dramatically to organizations dealing with AIDS in the Hispanic community."

And this year, Bush got the GOP-controlled state Senate to scuttle a hate-crimes bill that would have protected PWAs and gays and that had already passed the House. Says openly gay Dallas City Councilmember John Loza, a Republican, "I was very disappointed in Bush—he just didn't want this bill to pass his desk, period. Even a majority of Republicans here supported it in polls, and I don't think it would have hurt his presidential ambitions."

This pandering to social conservatives isn't new: When Bush first ran for governor, one issue used to beat Ann Richards—who had PWAs on her staff—was her support for repeal of the state's sodomy law, which Bush has defended as a "symbolic gesture of traditional values." (Two Houston men arrested last year in their bedroom under this "symbolic" law are currently challenging it in the courts.)

Since Bush is running as a tax-and-budget cutter, anyone who thinks he would deem AIDS a crisis in need of substantial funding is simply dreaming, given his record. As the Bering-Omega Center's Livesay puts it, "When people outside of Texas talk positively about George W., it's kind of like the French admiration for Jerry Lewis—here, we just don't get it."

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