AIDS Advocates Debate Obama's Policies

Leaders in the HIV/AIDS community commend President-elect Barack Obama's pledge for a national AIDS strategy, but call on him to honor that commitment during his first 100 days in office.

November 24, 2008 By James Wortman

Despite George W. Bush's lauded President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) to fight HIV abroad, most experts agree that efforts to prevent and treat the virus on U.S. soil have not been nearly as successful during his eight-year administration.

With the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announcing in August that the rate of new infections in the United States is 40 percent higher than previously estimated, it is of the utmost importance that President-elect Barack Obama honor his promise to keep domestic HIV/AIDS as one of his top policy priorities.

"Obama has pledged that, in the first year of his presidency, he will develop and begin to implement a comprehensive national HIV/AIDS strategy that includes all federal agencies," reads a statement released in October on his official campaign website, BarackObama.com. "The strategy will be designed to reduce HIV infections, increase access to care and reduce HIV-related health disparities. His strategy will include measurable goals, timelines and accountability mechanisms."

Advocates hope that the strategy will allow for comprehensive sex education, better housing for positive people, improved access to treatment and the support of evidence-based interventions such as syringe-exchange programs. That's quite a tall order for our next commander-in-chief.

On November 11, just over a week after the election dust had settled and Obama was declared the victor in the heated 2008 presidential race, the Community HIV/AIDS Mobilization Project (CHAMP) assembled some of the most influential leaders in the AIDS world for a teleconference.

"The Election and the Epidemic: Aiming Higher for HIV Policies in the Next Administration and Congress" discussed and analyzed the measures that the next administration must implement to ensure a bold, effective and comprehensive AIDS response and to generate, for the first time, a national AIDS strategy.

“Those of us who have been doing community organizing around HIV/AIDS for a long time I think have felt like, ‘Geez, what else can we say, and what else can we do to impress upon folks the urgency of getting involved and advocating for better policies and being more in support of candidates?’” said Mark McLaurin, CHAMP board member and director of public policy and legislative affairs for the Public Justice Center. “This election was, for many of us, the realization that there is energy out there to do stuff. So now, many of us are re-engaged.”

Near the end of his presentation, McLaurin said that while Obama will be aided by a progressive majority in Congress to bring attention to HIV/AIDS in highest-risk communities—namely people of color and men who have sex with men (MSM)—it is impossible to know with absolute certainty whether the needs of those groups will be met.

“There certainly are hopeful signs,” he said. “[Such as] the AIDS plan that the Obama administration has already committed to, and the people around him seem to be more focused on efficacy rather than cost, which is really important.”

Other presenters during the 90-minute teleconference included Vanessa Brocato, executive director of CHAMP; Christine Campbell, vice president of national advocacy and organizing for New York-based AIDS service organization Housing Works; Rebecca E. Fox, national director of the National Coalition for LGBT Health; Kali Lindsey, vice president for federal government affairs with the National Association of People with AIDS (NAPWA) and director for federal government affairs with the Treatment Access Expansion Project (TAEP); Naina Khanna of the U.S. Positive Women’s Network and the National Women and AIDS Collective; Chris Collins with the Coalition for a National AIDS Strategy; and Dennis de Leon, president of the Latino Commission on AIDS (LCOA).

LCOA spearheaded the National Latino/Hispanic AIDS Action Agenda in Washington, DC, in January to mobilize community leaders and create a national blueprint to address HIV among Latinos—the second most-affected population in the United States behind African Americans.

“There needs to be a national agenda which is really inclusive,” de Leon said. “Several of the national agendas that we’ve seen do not include the issue of immigration and do not include issues of concern for the Hispanic community. So we’re asking that whatever national agenda gets developed encompasses the needs of Hispanics.”

Presentations were diverse, calling for increased attention to issues ranging from LGBT health disparities to microbicide development to vaccine research, but all presenters agreed on one thing—Obama’s national AIDS strategy must be all-encompassing.

“The U.S. response to HIV remains really more of a patchwork of uncoordinated programs, so the response doesn’t have the strategic, coordinated approach needed to accomplish primary goals. For example, reducing incidence, increasing access to care and reducing racial disparities,” Collins said. “The idea behind a national AIDS strategy is that we need a coordinated effort—not just a quick sketch. Now, there have been AIDS plans before, as we all know, and they haven’t done a lot. How will this be any different? Well, we have to make it different.”

Hardly waiting for Obama's official inauguration in January, CHAMP worked with ACT UP Philadelphia, the Student Global AIDS Campaign and several other organizations to stage a rally November 20 in Washington, DC, to applaud Obama while holding him true to his word, urging for the formation of an AIDS response during the first 100 days of his presidency.

Brocato of CHAMP said the rally—which united 1,000 people at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue—was a way of "warming up the White House for President-elect Obama, with high hopes that he will be the real AIDS president."

Their rallying cry? "Yes we can." Let's hope they're right.

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