¡La Emergencia!

April 1, 2001 By Denny Lee

They say that all politics is local, and this winter New York City's Latino community proved that even maneuvers created inside-the-Beltway can be tried successfully at home.

Last December, the city's health department released its annual HIV stats, showing a familiar decline in new AIDS cases (but not infections). But one figure jumped off the pages: While about 9 percent of the nation's Latino population live in the Big Apple, more than 30 percent of Latino PWAs call the city home.

Two weeks later, following the lead of the Congressional Black Caucus -- who in 1999 won $156 million in federal prevention money to target blacks -- a sizable crowd of elected officials, AIDS advocates and priests climbed the steps of City Hall make it official: an "HIV State of Emergency" among Gotham's Latinos. Leaders called on Mayor Rudy Guiliani to proclaim HIV the "No. 1 health crisis for Latinos" and to sharply increase funding to minority-run AIDS groups and drug-treatment programs.

The challenge was also directed at the Latino community, which advocates admit has been, at best, sluggish in responding to the epidemic. "Culturally, males have a license to practice unsafe sex," City Council member Margarita Lopez said. "That is unacceptable."

But just as the feds stopped short of declaring an African-American emergency, Guiliani never raised the Latino alarm. But that's beside the point, said Dennis DeLeon, director of the Latino Commission on AIDS, a group that helped craft the local resolution. "We needed to kick the discussion into a higher gear. This is a way of putting the facts in people's faces."

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