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January 1, 1998 By Sean Strub

“The Social Impact of AIDS in the United States,” a 1993 study published by the National Research Council, concluded that “ many geographical areas and strata of the population are virtually untouched by the epidemic and probably never will be [touched]; certain confined areas and populations have been devastated and are likely to continue to be.... HIV/AIDS will ‘disappear’, not because, like smallpox, it has been eliminated, but because those who continue to be affected by it are...beyond the sight and attention of the majority population.”

Released five years ago, this study has proved to be remarkably prescient. AIDS is disappearing from the national landscape-not because it has gone away, but because it has found an apparently permanent home in poverty-stricken communities and is unlikely to be moving anywhere else anytime soon. As a result, AIDS has taken its place among the many social and political ills that our leaders dismiss as too complex and intractable to be solved.

In the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, AIDS was finally recognized as a crisis, and attracted public sympathy and media attention largely because it was devastating a generation of gay white men who were economically and socially empowered. We had connections and we made those connections feel our pain until they did something about it.

But today, the communities where the disease is surging have few connections, little power and almost no voice. AIDS is only one of the problems barraging them. Show me a neighborhood with abandoned housing, and I’ll show you a neighborhood with AIDS. Show me a neighborhood with drug dealers on the street corners, and I’ll show you a neighborhood with AIDS. Show me a neighborhood with underweight newborns, and I’ll show you a neighborhood with AIDS.

With 70-plus percent of new infections among people of color – more African Americans aged 25 to 44 are dying from AIDS than from homicide, drugs, alcohol, cancer and heart disease combined – the people most profoundly affected by AIDS today are the most disenfranchised, unheard and unheralded Americans. And the sense of crisis is long gone.

As liberal vanished from our official vernacular, it was replaced with pious calls for “personal responsibility” and “political realism.” The result? A million more children condemned to poverty by welfare “reform.” Another million young African-American and Latino men and women locked up because we won’t invest in drug treatment, job training and rehabilitation counseling. A useless “war on drugs” that increasingly militarizes our streets and institutions while it does little to reduce crime.

Policy makers cost-analyze and subject entire populations to spreadsheet survivalism. AIDS, breast cancer, teen pregnancies – these are just more liabilities, cost-centers, to be shut down to social concern like so many unprofitable divisions of a corporation.

Once, at least some political movers saw value in speaking the truth – even when unpopular – simply because it was the truth. Yet social change, public health and moral integrity are no longer valued as ends in themselves – they have become tools to be manipulated when useful in the pursuit of higher office or economic gain.

President Clinton has called for a “national dialogue on race” and appointed a commission to ruminate on the problem. But what he and most politicians refuse to do is to take the bold steps that could save the lives of thousands of people of color. When it comes to AIDS – that “disappearing” disease –no example exceeds the feds’ genocidal failure, despite overwhelming public support and scientific evidence, to provide clean syringes for injection drug users.

We must force those in power to do what public health professionals have been begging for: lift the ban on needle-exchange funding. And beyond that, invest massive sums for drug treatment, housing and medical care that are so urgently needed in communities hardest hit by AIDS nationwide.

Let us all commit ourselves to making this new year the one in which we push for lifesaving policies – not just cheap talk. And work to usher in an era of new politics, with a new culture of caring to replace the cruel indifference to which we’ve become accustomed. After all, in the long run – which is all that really counts – what kind of world do we want?

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