ACT UP Brings a Funeral to Senator Pat Toomey's Home [SLIDESHOW]

April 17, 2017 By POZ Staff

On April 13 in Zionsville, Pennsylvania, about 50 AIDS activists led a political funeral procession, which included a coffin complete with a skeleton branded a "casualty of Pat Toomey," to the Republican senator's home.

ACT UP Philadelphia, the group behind the protest, made the trek to protest Toomey's support of President Trump's recent budget proposals.

"President Trump's budget blueprint proposes a significant increase in spending to strengthen national security, rebuild our neglected military, and honor our commitment to veterans with additional resources for the VA," said Toomey in a statement released on March 16. "To pay for these changes, it proposes reductions to non-defense programs."

In further defense of the Trump-recommended cuts, Toomey added: "After years of overspending, I am encouraged that the President has proposed actual spending cuts and has committed to maintaining the overall cap on discretionary spending. I look forward to carefully examining each of the proposed reductions in this budget proposal."

Protestors hold banners and signs as they make their way to Senator Pat Toomey's home. Courtesy of ACT UP Philadelphia

To the dismay of HIV advocates and supporters, the proposed budget includes billions of dollars in cuts to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and hundreds of millions of dollars in cuts to the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR).

Through programs such as HOPWA (Housing Opportunities for People With AIDS) and the Section 8 housing voucher program, HUD makes it possible for many people living with HIV and their families to receive safe and stable housing. However, the department faces a staggering loss of $6 billion in funding.

PEPFAR may be another victim of Trump's budget. In one of our recent staff blogs, we discussed how George W. Bush urged lawmakers to continue full funding for PEPFAR, the global HIV/AIDS initiative launched in 2003, during his first term in office, which has saved nearly 12 million lives. The Trump administration wants to cut PEPFAR's funding by $300 million.

So will the potential loss of lives to AIDS rest on Toomey's shoulders? To the HIV activists who participated in the procession, the answer is clearly "yes." Protester Tyrone Boykin put it more bluntly: "Senator Toomey cannot vote for this budget or he will have blood on his hands."

"Right now, we are carrying an empty coffin, but if this budget passes, we know people will die

because of it," said member Max Ray-Riek in a statement from ACT UP. "We are not afraid to bring the ashes of our loved ones back to your door if they die because of budget cuts."

It's been 25 years since ACT UP held its first political funeral in Washington D.C., with protesters scattering the ashes of loved ones on the White House lawn, and here we are again. But with an administration looking to cut back on programs that have helped millions of people living with HIV, such forms of activism remain vital.

Will Toomey heed the cries and chants of ACT UP Philadelphia and vote against Trump's budget, or will he continue to support a much-criticized proposal with the potential to harm the health of millions?

Check out the Facebook Live video below.

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