African American Conference on AIDS on Life Support?

January 19, 2010 By Larry Bryant

It was recently announced that The 2010 National Conference on African Americans and AIDS (NCAAA) in Baltimore this year has been “postponed indefinitely”. One would suspect that declining attendance has affected financial stability of putting it together and paying for staff to organize it year after year. The NCAAA along with its sister Latino Conference were created with the objective of providing ’accessible, culturally sensitive and cutting edge medical education, designed to fit the continuing education needs of a variety of healthcare professionals’. Considering the change and evolution of the HIV & AIDS epidemic toward heavily impacting communities of color, these two conferences provided a much needed forum to bring these topics together in a meaningful and productive way.

What does the absence of a major national forum/conference mean to the public and professional dialogue around the HIV & AIDS in the African American community?

I first attended in 2006 and as a staff member with Housing Works, I have been every year since. I believe that the NCAAA’s significance is in embedded in the fact that it provided a forum for minority physicians, researchers, and other healthcare professionals to disseminate and articulate and epidemic that in recent times is centered in communities of color. Together with the Latino Conference, there are no other national forums that address the entirety of two hardest hit populations in the US. Where does opportunity exist now?

I am uncertain of the specific factors for the postponing, however the last few years, before the economy was the front page issue it currently is, the NCAAA attendance became extremely regional. With the limited ability for individuals and organizations to raise money for long distance travel, attracting attendees up and down the I-95 corridor - between NYC and DC - participation - became a priority and from individuals and organizations from west of Ohio were rare. The conference also became heavily dependent and influenced by pharmaceutical companies and their marketing. Like most large conferences, there is huge - some would say damaging - dependence on sponsorships that place various limitations and expectations on agenda, format, and feel that add more of a distance between its marketing and its target audience.

While the epidemic has expanded and become much more diverse and complex - just within the African-American community in regards to region, socioeconomic status, gender, etc. - the tone of NCAAA seemed to be tighten and become far more separated from its roots and the roots of its community. To go back a couple of years and listen to the Rev. Jesse Jackson proclaim “if Black people weren’t so promiscuous” the epidemic would end - essentially, if we are positive, we deserve it. Or to listen to CNN’s

Roland Martin throw Black gay men under the bus in 2009 doesn't exactly encourage a wide community following or even start a healthy dialogue of healing. Sadly, those paid plenary speakers are only famous faces and voices that use their stature and (HIV) status to reflect the schism in African-American communities across the country when addressing the compounding issues that affect us. Homophobia, poverty, sexism, mental illness, substance abuse, racism, unemployment, etc. Until we as an entire community can honestly and openly create a dialogue that addresses strategies to put a sustained and measurable path toward ending the epidemic, we will continue to find ourselves at these dead-ends.

With the current economic climate, I can understand to a point where some of the difficulties lie. However, I believe that we allow "funding" and "funding sources" to be an excuse more times than an actual barrier. I understand and respect the limitations of organizational spending in a fragile economy, I also understand that many of the financial standards of attendance or inclusion to local, regional, or national conferences and coalitions have always been far beyond what the average to smaller organizations can afford - and forget about it if you are an unaffiliated individual. Small community based organizations, particularly in the South, have always been left off the radar when it comes to national participation partly because they don't have the financial support and bank that get the 'wooing' to participate. Sadly, this also translates into policy development and "consensus" to national initiatives - the bottom line, if you can afford to travel, if you can afford to pay your dues, you can play the game (talk about politics at its lowest common denominator).

If anything, the conference's postponement, is more of an indication of our lack of support and commitment to the survival and sustainability for the communities and organizations that need the most help and attention.

For example,

why doesn't the conference machine, the National Minority AIDS Council, doesn't have national conference that focuses primarily on 'minorities'? The National Association of People With AIDS (NAPWA) has essentially downsized any national or regional forums for people of color living with HIV & AIDS. With the 'indefinite postponement' of NCAAA - and inevitably the conjoined twin Latino Conference - the landscape of meaningful, visible, national forums for people of color to address these issues is very bleak.

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