Barack, I Need You In The Game

October 8, 2010 By Larry Bryant

Mr. President --

I have been following you since your historic election with clear eyes.

I am proud of the achievements since your first day in office that point toward ending the HIV & AIDS epidemic in the United States; appointments of Office of National AIDS Policy staff, lifting the HIV Travel Ban, release of the first National HIV & AIDS Strategy, the makeover of the President's Advisory Council on HIV & AIDS, are among them. However, I am mindful of all that remains to be done.

I know that there are some frustrated with your administrations less than urgent pace when it comes to HIV & AIDS related issues. There are also some who are more concerned about their own titles and lunch dates to speak openly - if at all - of your inconsistent attention to fund and implement life saving and life preserving interventions. I do know that there are many - many who

voted for your *Hope* - who are languishing perilously close to despair and death, desperate for your follow through.

Many have made much about the outcome of this election and what it means for your re-election chances. There has even been much made about the made-for-FOX-News monster called the Tea Party with (the head of Sarah Palin) roaming the countryside and beating unsuspecting incumbents into submission.

The truth is, people living with HIV & AIDS need you **now** and we need you more than ever. We need you to assert yourself and those who carry your torch in Congress (i.e. Pelosi, Reid). I need you to get in to this game.

None of us thought this would be easy, despite your decisive and overwhelming ascension to the Executive Office. Changing or reversing policy and politics that have contributed, directly or indirectly, to the over 30,000 HIV & AIDS related U.S. deaths will be hard. Trust me, we have the quilt panels, coffins, and body bags to show for it.

The fight to urgently address HIV & AIDS education, prevention, care and services for many of us have been as critical, if not more so, than any war overseas, the national economy, or 'saving' our financial institutions. And if you were as serious and committed as you were during your campaign two years ago about ending the circular rhetoric around a preventable and treatable disease, those of us living with HIV & AIDS would also feel *bailed out*.

We need to see and feel your leadership during this midterm election - not just the contemplative, thoughtful, and patient Chief Executive. We need you to see and hear the decisiveness you aimed at the auto industry and with following through on bringing our troops home. We who are living and dying with HIV & AIDS, those who are suffering through the deadly stigma, ignorance, and discrimination need your bold and "ambitious" leadership to overcome the bigotry, racism, and homophobia that consistently strangles the life out of us. I need your visible and vocal leadership to demand accountability - not just buy-in or collaboration - from national and community HIV & AIDS organizations who are nearly criminal in this act of public anonymity and private snobbery toward people with AIDS passionately fighting for their lives. Criminal in the fact that many of these organizations tout their roots in being the "trusted independent voice of people living with HIV" on many levels.

If that apathy and deconstructive strategies persist, we all lose. I need you in the game.

One game plan that boldly announces your commitment to urgent action is to **commit $126**

million to ending the AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP) waiting lists across the country. Currently, about 3500 individuals sit helpless - most of whom reside in southern states, are people of color, and under or uninsured - only moving up on various wait lists when someone dies. At the current rate, the number could expand to almost 5000 by year's end, giving many of us a clue to what will be on many Christmas lists. This commitment should also come in the form of urging members of congress to support saving the lives of their constituents, their families, their neighbors, their loved ones. I need you in the game.

You didn't run for president to be remembered and measured by your popularity or marketability. You didn't run for president as part of a slick public relations campaign by BET or MTV to get young people to buy 'Rock The Vote' t-shirts either. As I remember - and as I consistently reminded by the many emails you send me - you believed in a simple idea; "that each and every one of us, working together, has the power to move this country forward. We believed that this was the moment to solve the challenges that the country had ignored for far too long".

The preventable and treatable HIV & AIDS epidemic in this country and around the world has gone on far too long and has taken far too many of us in the process. We cannot continue to be ignored on wait lists and in waiting rooms. Mr. President, you cannot continue to ignore those of us who die spiritual, emotional, social, and personal deaths long before the physical one. We need you to commit to your own ambitious goals when entering office and allow implementation of the National HIV & AIDS Strategy to follow your lead and leave us empty and reaching toward misplaced trust in your visions.

So, for the next three weeks, the fight at the polls will continue. They will continue to divide us; they will continue to define us. Above it all I need your commitment. And I need your help to get your friends and neighbors involved.

If you demonstrate this visible and vocal leadership toward ending this epidemic, the 3500 you save by **committing $126 million to the ADAP crisis** will become 7000. And our AIDS Vote 2012 campaign will have twice as many supporters in the game who will make significant contributions to grassroots advocacy and activism that may have a role to the political process, turning out many more at the polls.

If we meet this test - if you, like me, believe that ending this epidemic is not a spectator sport - we will not just end HIV & AIDS. In the years that come, we can begin to realize the changes we are ultimately seeking - poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, homelessness - and reclaim the American dream for this generation.

Thank you for getting back in the game,

Larry Bryant

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