“Dearth of experience in Black communities”

March 2, 2009 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

It seemed to me that the appointment last week of Jeffrey Crowley as director of the Office of National AIDS Policy by the Obama administration was mostly welcome news to the HIV/AIDS community, which is why the following reaction from the Black AIDS Institute got my attention.

I don’t know what experience Crowley has had with the African-American community, but clearly the Black AIDS Institute believes it’s lacking. Even if Crowley does lack a personal understanding of how HIV/AIDS has impacted black America, I have no doubt that he will be encouraged to acquire it.

Here’s the text from their statement, which I received by e-mail (I added the italics and bold for emphasis):

NEW NATIONAL AIDS DIRECTOR: PROMISING, BUT CHALLENGES REMAIN

Newly appointed director of the Office of National AIDS Policy is expert in health care reform, but has scant experience fighting AIDS where it’s worst: Black America. Black AIDS Institute pledges assistance.

The Black AIDS Institute welcomes President Obama's selection of Jeffrey Crowley as the new head of the White House Office of National AIDS Policy. The selection underscores the President's commitment to reinvigorate our national AIDS response, filling a critical post that had remained vacant for more than two years. By tapping someone with such a strong background in AIDS policy, the Administration indicates its seriousness in addressing one of the country's greatest health threats.

Crowley's experience in public health research and expertise in Medicaid policy, including Medicaid prescription drug policies; Medicare policy; and consumer education and training underscores the administration's commitment to make sure HIV/AIDS are included in the health care reform conversation facing our nation. A stronger public health response to AIDS goes hand in hand with our long-overdue effort to achieve universal health coverage.

But America simply cannot win the fight against AIDS unless it wins it in Black America. Renewing our fight against AIDS in the United States requires that our leaders recognize the complete nature of the foe we are facing. “AIDS in America today, is a Black disease,” says Phill Wilson, CEO of the Black AIDS Institute.

Regardless of the lens used to look at the domestic epidemic - gender, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic class, education level, or geographic region - Black people bear the brunt of the AIDS epidemic in America. “We are less than 13% of the US population,” says Wilson, “yet we are nearly 50% of the new cases, 50% of people living with HIV/AIDS, and roughly 50% of the annual HIV/AIDS deaths in the U.S.”

Mr. Crowley’s dearth of experience in Black communities is reason for pause. Although we would have preferred the President’s appointment to this post be someone with stronger ties to Black communities, even with the most intelligent leadership, the federal

government cannot conquer AIDS on its own.

The Black AIDS Institute urges Mr. Crowley and the administration to reach out to Black leaders and communities to join forces in a common effort to reduce new HIV infections and AIDS deaths. We also call on traditional Black leaders to initiate an HIV/AIDS dialogue with the administration. Finally, the Institute pledges to do all it can to assist Mr. Crowley and President Obama turn the tide against HIV in our community and our country.

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