Coal For Christmas

December 22, 2011 By Aundaray Guess

Do you remember when you was a child and you dreamed that underneath the Christmas tree amongst the wrapped packages was the one toy item you've been hinting at wanting. You truly felt you deserved it as all year you've been on your best behavior and followed all the rules, so in your heart you hope you're being rewarded for your efforts.

The time comes to unwrap the gift and instead of the action figure or doll you receive a pair of tube socks.

Damn!

All that hard work for nothing!

Well this year the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene handed out not tube sock but something even worse than coal. For many HIV prevention organizations in NYC, they gave those hard working HIV agencies a fifty percent cut in funding effective 2012.

The cuts were based on the CDC's recognition of achievement in testing, prevention and linkage to care. In other words, "Since you're doing so good, you don't need much of our help' So because HIV agencies came up with creative initiatives to get people aware of their health they are in essence getting punished for it.

A question can be asked, especially if you're looking at NYC what neighborhoods are you looking at that rates are going down, Chelsea? Because in other areas of the city, especially improvised neighborhoods, HIV rates for young African American and Latino men and women are going up.

Research indicates that HIV and Syphilis rates are 140 times higher among MSM in NYC compared to other populations. HIV rates are also increasing for women of color, representing 95.3% of new HIV infections, yet somehow, somewhere, somebody who has alphabets behind their names and have never set foot in the affect neighborhoods, except maybe for a photo op, has decided that the sun is out so we can all put away the umbrellas.

This is a huge step back and a slap in the face to people who have hustled to get people in to test, learn about stigma and invest in their care. Many soldiers stood on the front line in this battle and because of the cuts in 2012 already some of those soldiers have been fired or relieved of their duty just in time for the holidays.

As an agency that receives funding from NYCDOHMH this can be seen as biting the hand that feeds you, but I truly feel that if these cuts are implemented and attention is not made then all the work that has

been done will slowly evaporate and if it means biting that hand, then so be it as this cannot go unnoticed.

And I'm truly not trying to go there but if it was gay white men dying and experiencing growing rates of infection, would we even be having this conversation. It seems the bus for marriage equality is the engine that drives most attention and funding while HIV amongst people of color is trailing in the caboose, an afterthought if thought at all.

So thank you NYCDOHMH for the coal this holiday season and maybe you'll have a visit by the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future and in that future you will see the mistake you're making.

One can only hope.

In the meantime for those affected by the rising rates, don't drink the Kool-Aid and think we can let our guard down. This virus is still here and it's not going anywhere anytime soon despite what is said from the mountain tops on high!

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