New York On $11.50 Per Day

May 11, 2010 By Sean Strub

Last year, I joined the LGBT committee for the reelection of New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg. When I was asked to join, I thought Bloomberg would not have a viable opponent and did not understand exactly how poor his record on AIDS really was.

I had recently moved back to New York on a part-time basis, but I was not closely following municipal AIDS issues. I was definitely out of touch with politics (Bloomberg just barely won reelection even as he outspent Bill Thompson, his opponent, by more than ten to one).

At the time, I thought Bloomberg's reelection was inevitable, I was enamored of his administration's progressive transportation policies and when a good friend asked me to join the committee, I said yes. I quickly discovered my decision was a careless one. I was rightfully taken to task by some activists and got a fast education and update on several critical AIDS issues in New York City, most notably housing.

At the time, I considered eating crow and resigning from the Mayor's LGBT reelection committee. But after consultation with (and following the advice of) several activists working on NYC AIDS issues, I decided to stick it out and try to do something useful with the little tiny bit of access my role on his reelection committee might provide. I figured I could always eat the crow later, which is part of what you're reading here.

I was successful at getting the attention of and then a meeting with members of Bloomberg's campaign team who work on policy-related issues. I told them about people with HIV in New York City desperate for housing assistance who were trying to get sicker--to lower their CD4 count to below 200--so they would meet the city's requirements for help.

I told them about new research showing how cost-effective it was to provide housing assistance for people with HIV and how it helped prevent new HIV infections. They set up a meeting for me and another activist working on his campaign with the city's deputy commissioner of health, Dr. Monica Sweeney.

Dr. Sweeney began the meeting by indicating her time was limited and she had a concurrent meeting underway in an adjacent office. She was meeting with us as a courtesy; that's part of politics. But soon she was fully engaged and ultimately spent several hours with us; it was after 6 pm when we left her office.

It was an interesting and frank conversation about the epidemic, empowerment, HIV criminalization, philosophies of public health and other topics. While it was clear we had some fundamental disagreements, I liked Dr. Sweeney and appreciated the attention with which she listened and responded to my concerns. I learned a lot from that conversation with her.

We talked specifically about recently published findings from a study in Chicago that proved how providing housing assistance not only reduced emergency room admissions, medical costs and high-risk sexual behaviors but also how economic it was for the taxpayers.

Before the meeting with Dr. Sweeney, Housing Works officials told me they were interested in having a similar pilot project undertaken in New York to see if the results could be replicated. I shared this with Dr. Sweeney and she indicated the city was looking into such a study. I urged her to include people with HIV, Housing Works and other advocates for housing for people with HIV early in the process of planning and designing the study.

Despite the interesting and lengthy meeting with Dr. Sweeney, and my attempts at follow-up effort, nothing tangible came of it. The city's record on AIDS has not improved and they continue to shut out some of the most effective and important grassroots AIDS activists from any significant role or voice in the process.

A proposal by the New York HIV Planning Council to require non-profit agencies that receive Ryan White Care Act funds to have a client of the agency on the agency's board of directors was effectively killed by the NYC Department of Health. Mayor Bloomberg's Department of Health has shown little or no interest in empowering people with HIV.

There is now even more research about and interest in housing as a cost-effective HIV prevention tool. But the Bloomberg administration is intransigent. Mayor Bloomberg himself has emerged as the leading opponent of a landmark bill (S2664/A2565; sponsored in the Senate by openly HIV positive Tom Duane and in the Assembly by Deborah Glick) recently passed with overwhelming support by the New York state legislature, that caps at 30% the amount of income people with HIV who get housing subsidies must pay for rent.

Today, those who receive housing subsidies from the city's HIV/AIDS Service Administration (HASA) must pay all but $344 of their income in rent, about $11.50 per day. Every penny they get each month, except for $344, must be paid to HASA. This is cruel. The legislation, now pending Governor Paterson's signature, would make the AIDS housing assistance program's rent requirements consistent with other programs, like Section 8 housing.

That one of the richest people in the world, a man with the choice of sleeping in any one of a number of mansions, is leading the effort to get Governor Paterson to veto the bill is ironic.

There are budget analyses by experts showing how this legislation will save taxpayers' money and others make contrary claims. The debate is appropriate, particularly if it includes an examination of the hidden costs of homelessness and how it fuels other problems, like AIDS.

But Bloomberg’s opposition to the legislation feels practically knee-jerk, as it is consistent with a trend his administration has exhibited for years.

Under Mayor Bloomberg’s leadership, people with HIV in New York City have been disempowered, services have been severely cut and they have sought to marginalize the voices of some our most effective advocates. I regret lending my name to his reelection committee.

Governor Patterson has indicated to advocates that he supports this legislation but he has not yet signed the bill. You can remind him of his commitment by calling 518-474-8390 or you can fill out this letter https://secure2.convio.net/fpwa/site/Advocacy?cmd=display&page=UserAction&id=332

o Governor Paterson, created by the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies. For more specifics, contact Sean Barry at the New York City AIDS Housing Network or check out their facebook page.

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