Red ink blots Black AIDS Day

February 7, 2011 By David Ernesto Munar

Last week, the Federal Reserve chairman gave a stern warning to Congress not to play politics with an impending vote to raise the nation's debt ceiling.

"It's not something you want to play around with -- the United States would be forced into a position of defaulting on its debt," Mr. Ben Bernanke said at the National Press Club. "And the implications of that for our financial system, for our fiscal policy, for our economy would be catastrophic."

On February 7, National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day, I'm wondering where is our Ben Bernanke.

The tenor of fiscal debate on Capitol Hill is not only worrying investors, but also the millions of ordinary Americans who rely on government assistance to keep a roof over their heads, food on the table, medicine in the cabinet, and help coping with job loss or disabilities.

For lawmakers, potential market instabilities garner attention, but what about the catastrophic effects of deep health and human service cuts, stalled or threatened healthcare reforms, and neglected Social Security Administration, Medicare, and Medicaid systems upon which tens of millions of vulnerable Americans depend?

For the African-American community, which bears the brunt of the nation's HIV/AIDS crisis, the threats are real and could have negative repercussions for decades to come.

According to government estimates, more than half a million African-Americans are living with HIV/AIDS in the U.S. On average, Black Americans with HIV learn of their infection later than other groups, benefit the least from powerful antiviral therapies and survive AIDS at lower rates than their non-Black peers. On average, Blacks account for every other HIV infection in America, which occur at a rate of about one person infected every 9 ½ minutes.

Combined with high rates of poverty, under/un-insurance, job loss and myriad health disparities--from heart disease to asthma, diabetes and violent crimes--the accumulated catastrophes facing Black communities are severe. Congressional jockeying for even greater fiscal austerity as the nation struggles to emerge from an historic economic recession will only compound these challenges for Black Americans.

Where is our chairman with the ear of Capitol Hill to sound the alarm? Who will push back against those who would decimate federal health and human services--including critical HIV programs?

Just last month, the new Republican majority in the U.S. House of Representatives fast tracked legislation to disenfranchise 32 million Americans--including millions of African Americans--from the new law

mitigating inadequate, non-existent or unaffordable healthcare coverage. The new health insurance law also makes Medicare more affordable for retirees and disabled workers. The U.S. Senate stopped the repeal measure last week in a vote along party lines.

As states struggle to balance their budgets and stimulus grants expire, congressional leaders are pushing draconian funding cuts for everything from low-income housing to biomedical research, healthcare services, substance abuse treatment, mental health, workforce development, primary prevention, and implementation of health reform.

The state fiscal crisis has already resulted in nearly $200 million in state funding cuts for HIV-related prevention and care services and more than 10 states have slashed their AIDS Drug Assistance Programs (ADAP)--a lifeline for low-income people with HIV with no other means to afford their lifesaving antiviral medications. More than 6,000 people with HIV/AIDS are languishing on ADAP waiting lists and that is just the tip of the iceberg. An estimated 87,000 Americans are not receiving the HIV medications they need to prolong their lives and help curb new infections.

Proposed funding cuts for discretionary health and human services in the federal fiscal year that begins October 1, 2011 would go even deeper and destabilize entire low-income communities--many of them Black communities--already struggling against the jobless economic recovery.

Without continued investments in our nation’s people and future, the slow recovery is likely to be even more prolonged. But that has not dissuaded fiscal hawks on Capitol Hill to champion billions in extended tax cuts for the nation’s most well-off, compounding the federal deficit they profess to care so much about.

What is most apparent on this National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day is the wrenching deficit facing the nation: more than accumulated red ink, it is a deficit in leadership against HIV/AIDS.

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