Achieving An “HIV-Free Future” Will Need An Ignorant-Free Present

June 24, 2011 By Larry Bryant

Washington D.C. Department Health HIV & AIDS, Hepatitis, STD, and TB Administration (HAHSTA) Director Dr. Gregory Pappas recently submitted an opinion piece to the Washington Blade titled ’*Fighting For An HIV-free future*’. Though using the words “tremendous” and “exciting” to describe the city’s recent work in addressing what the Center’s For Disease Control has termed as "*severe and generalized epidemic*", it is clear that future will not arrive without a comprehensive, and city-wide approach with effective and measurable goals and set and stated accountability to achieve those goals.

Close to 900 District residents living with HIV & AIDS currently sit on a growing housing wait list that has grown exponentially in the last 3 years. According to the National AIDS Housing Coalition, "*Major studies have proven that providing housing for poor people living with HIV & AIDS dramatically improves health outcomes*." However, structural interventions including housing are completely ignored when developing effective prevention and care strategies. This blatant disregard extends to the approximately 27,000 households waiting for low-income housing in the city, many of whom fit the criteria for populations most at risk.

Secondly, despite growing STD and HIV infections among the District’s youth, city officials are stubbornly reluctant to implement comprehensive sex & sexuality education in all school aged settings. Again, studies show these programs, when properly presented by adequately trained and willing educators, lower new infections and early births, and lessen the violence aimed at queer and questioning youth. Perhaps not implementing a life-protecting and life-saving measure among the ’next’ population is a political decision, which also begs the question: Why are we allowing politicians to make smart public health decisions when we know they can’t?

I challenge Dr. Pappas, D.C. Mayor Vincent Gray and his D.C. HIV & AIDS Commission appointees to make the fundamental changes necessary to heal the societal wounds that consistently fuel the HIV & AIDS epidemic in the District. If we are not acknowledging the roles that poverty, education, joblessness, homophobia, and sexual violence play in cementing those health disparities - particularly among people of color - we will continue this perpetual march. These changes in antiquated policies and hurtful ideology would prove to be cost effective and, more importantly, save current and future lives.

There has also been the strategy of putting on a ’good face’ for the city - and the country, for that

matter - when it comes to fighting AIDS. You know, if we profusely thank our leaders, including President Barack Obama, for the fractions of the needed whole of support, funding, and strategies dedicated the priority AIDS issues, then they will smile on us and validate our scheduled lunch dates on the Hill. In other words, if we talk about all good things we have, um, accomplished and ignore all that we haven't, we will better ensure the re-election of our good friends.

Bullshit!

First of all, the President will not win or lose the election based solely on his record on AIDS, and that's a shame. If his office truly felt that urgency, perhaps we would finally receive answers from his office that would end the AIDS Drug Assistance Program crisis currently holding about 8500 people hostage on a expanding wait list. It is the warnings from Dr. Pappas, as well as other national AIDS policy experts, about the dark forces seeking to prevent the President's re-election by using any and all tools to deconstruct his 2012 edition of the Hope Machine.

Let's be clear, they are telling people living with HIV & AIDS, their loved ones, and allies that we should not add to those tools by challenging him to keep his promises. Individuals who are living, and dying, on wait lists and in waiting rooms across the country should... wait some more. Until after next year's election. And then what? Obviously poor people's issues - particularly poor people with AIDS - are not important enough to campaign publicly for.

To me, this is a pure form of disrespect to country's Chief Officer, especially as he seeks to add four more years to his historic first term. We should lob softballs to him and his office to knock out the park to inflate his home run count. Pad his stats like it's the closing minutes of a meaningless basketball game. Fuck the triple-double, guys! Let's get the victory to the over 1.6 million people living with HIV & AIDS by doing the hard work of finishing what we started. (*You see where the triple-double got LeBron and the Heat.*)

Back in the D.C. government, the city's leaders are in full party planning mode, preparing our best linen and silver for global guests arriving to break bread at next summer's International AIDS Conference. Smoothing out all the kinks to our public presence while doing little or nothing of substance to demonstrate measurable change in the American city with an HIV rate ten times above the national average - highest in the country and comparable to the rates in sub-Saharan African countries.

An "HIV- Free Future" *is* possible if we actually believe we can make it happen. Does Dr. Pappas, Mayor Gray, and President Obama *believe* it can happen and are they doing all that it takes to make it happen?

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