# Is Governor Paterson Bad At Math?

September 19, 2010 By Regan Hofmann

I tried to find a little peace this morning. I just wanted a cup of tea and an hour sitting outside in the sunshine listening to the chimes hanging from my tree. I promised myself that once weekly, on Sunday, I will stop checking email on my phone for a mere 60 minutes, sit quietly in nature and pretend that the world is a sane, lovely and okay place.

But whenever I do, hell breaks lose. Which is why I am neurotically connected to my phone. I keep telling myself that I'm not neurotic, that I'm just a journalist, and that's what we do - obsess about the influx of info - but the truth is, I'm constantly perched on my toes waiting for the next blow to be dealt to people with HIV. Because they seem to be coming fast and furious lately.

Today's blow was dealt by Governor Paterson who vetoed a bill last Friday that could have created affordable housing protection for low-income families enrolled in the HIV/AIDS Services Administration (HASA) in New York.

As I watched one of my neighbor's bees (I know it was one of his as he has hives and his bees are skinny; the wild ones are a different breed and much fatter) teeter on the edge of my teacup, punch-drunk from sharing my sugar-laden tea, I read email after email about the impact the Governor's vote would have on thousands of people with HIV who teeter on the edge of homelessness. As I read accounts of people choosing between paying to keep a roof over their head, and being able to buy toilet paper and food, I suddenly felt sick. I understand that the world's not fair and that for many reasons, the wealth of the world will unfortunately never be spread evenly so that all may live an equally lovely life. I get that the world is Darwinian, dog-eat-dog and just plain mean sometimes. But what really infuriates me is when the people we elect to mitigate the world's cruelty and protect our lives make decisions that hurt people. Especially when those decisions can't be legitimately substantiated. Governor Paterson claims that he vetoed the bill to be fiscally responsible. But the truth is, his veto will cost the state more money - and will likely cost people their lives. How does this happen? Is he lying? Or is he just bad at math?

The bill, put forth by State Senator Tom Duane (a long time hero of people with HIV/AIDS in New York) and Assembly Member Deborah Glick, aimed to cap the rent contributions for all HASA clients at 30% of their Social Security Disability Income (SSDI) and establish a consistent policy within the agency (currently, the cap applies only to some clients). Without the bill, approximately 10,000 permanently disabled HASA clients are required to pay 70% or more of their disability income to rent.

The Governor's decision is likely to result in a logjam in the flow of getting people off the streets, into state-subsidized housing, and eventually, into a place of self-sufficiency thus lessening the strain on the state to cover their housing needs while making room for someone else who needs that critical first step of having a safe roof over their heads. What's more, many who are now in low-income housing will be pushed out of their apartments and into state-subsidized shelters. According to a press release by the

NYC AIDS Housing Network (NYCHAN) & Voices of Community Advocates (VOCAL), one in twenty HASA clients in the rental assistance program becomes homeless because they can not make rent. Once they are turned out on the streets, they are put into for-profit "SRO hotels" that cost more than twice what they were paying for their apartment. (So the cost of putting people into homeless shelters is far more than New York would have lost due to the rent cap.) Those who manage to meet rent payments often do so at the expense of eating, going to the doctor and keeping their lights and heat on.

Sean Barry, Director of NYCHAN/VOCAL said, "Governor Paterson decided to stand with Mayor Bloomberg and his failed policies around HIV/AIDS and homelessness in New York City, instead of the diverse coalition of city leaders calling for an affordable housing protection…This is a missed opportunity to save New York money and, far worse, it means thousands more people living with HIV/AIDS and their families will be in the shelter system, which is a short step away from emergency rooms and hospital beds."

"Shame on Governor Paterson," said Housing Works President and CEO Charles King. "He has gone back on a promise to sign this legislation and lent his support to a policy that actually penalizes people for being poor and receiving shelter assistance. I am embarrassed for him."

The Governor, who had allegedly promised on more than one occasion that he would sign the bill, claimed that the state's "financial crisis" was his reason for the veto. It seems a weak justification given that the rent cap would have actually saved the state money.

According to an analysis conducted by Shubert Botein Policy Associates, the bill was expected to pay for itself by "reducing rental arrears and emergency shelter placement, resulting in a net savings of more than $2 million."

Not to mention what making people living with HIV homeless will do to the cost of their HIV and general health care, for which the state and federal governments pay. You have to wonder how, in times when we need to pinch pennies, save lives AND reduce future costs, politicians can be allowed, over and over again, to make decisions that might make their budgets look good in the short term but that ultimately extract huge tolls both in terms of dollars and human lives down the path. (I've always wondered if we'd see our political leaders make more calls that would benefit more people in the long haul if they had term limits. You get elected. You've got one term to make your mark. Do as much good as you can. Then get out. Or, if we gave them longer terms so they could make the right decisions instead of decisions that will be most likely to get them re-elected.)

I wonder, if in fact the veto will SAVE the state money, why the governor hasn't addressed that fact. I called the Governor's office Friday, prior to the veto, and requested an interview post facto. They said the communications director would call back. It was close to 5 p.m. Hmmm, let's see if the governor's office returns my call tomorrow.

If I do get a chance to speak to him, I'm going to also ask him why he vetoed another bill that would have offered survivors of rape the opportunity to protect themselves against contracting HIV. Read my other blog about Paterson's last veto that endangered the lives of women here.

Personally, as a woman living with HIV who pays taxes to the state of New York, I'd like to know the answer to why the governor has decided to repeatedly veto legislation that saves money and lives. Maybe there's a good answer. But I have yet to hear it.

A protest is planned for 9:30 tomorrow morning outside of the governor’s office at 41st Street and Lexington Avenue in Manhattan. I’m heading over with the POZ team...so stay tuned of some video coverage on poz.com tomorrow. Join us if you can.

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