

Just news

San Francisco to the White House: "Take immediate action on AIDS"

Many of the first wave of the epidemic have become homeless as a result of housing or employment discrimination or the loss of health insurance.

BY DENISE SELLECK

The second wave of the AIDS epidemic — primarily affecting minority communities — is upon us, said witnesses before a Nov. 23 subcommittee hearing on AIDS. People with AIDS and public healthcare officials told the House Human Resources and Intergovernmental Relations Subcommittee hearing in San Francisco that the Reagan Administration must take immediate action.

The subcommittee came to San Francisco in the hope that the federal government can learn from the city's relative success in slowing the epidemic. Starting with the highest per capita incidence of AIDS, San Francisco's rate of new cases among gays is now less than one percent; for intravenous drug users, it is an estimated one to two percent. An unprecedented alliance of the city's public, private and volunteer sectors is apparently getting the message of safer sex across to at-risk groups, despite the complexities of disseminating information in a culturally diverse city.

At the hearing witnesses called for funding for explicit education programs to help make safer sex and drug practices the norm. Dr. Mindy Thompson Fullilove, associate director of Multicultural Inquiry and Research on AIDS, stressed the importance of communicating advice to people in their own idiom, especially when they don't share the dominant culture or language.

A not-very-explicit and not-very-idiomatic booklet on AIDS has been written by Surgeon General C. Everett Koop. But the booklet, which uses the word "rubber," is apparently still too strong for some in the White House. Thirty million copies of the booklet were printed, but they have never been distributed.

"There are people in the White House who would rather see people die than tell the truth about AIDS," Rep. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) told the hearing. Boxer has been waiting five

months for these booklets. "I think some of those people are guilty of murder," she added. It took subcommittee member Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) several months and a lot of hounding to pry loose 300,000 of the booklets from the White House — and even then she had to get them folded herself. Thirty-five members of the House drew on congressional funds to mail booklets out because the administration wouldn't allow the Surgeon General to do so.

Witnesses at the hearing demanded stringent federal legislation preventing discrimination against people with AIDS. They argued that such protection would encourage people to come forward for voluntary testing and would also help combat the racism sure to surface as the infection spreads in minority communities. Such legislation would also minimize the hardships suffered by people who already have AIDS, and their families and friends.

Meredith Miller, who has had AIDS since 1985, testified that she gave her children up for adoption to spare them the stigma of a parent with AIDS. "It's hard enough to live with the diagnosis and a million and one infections, but to be separated from your loved ones is devastating," she said. Miller pointed out that there were few shelters available for women with AIDS and almost none where they could bring their children.

Infants infected with AIDS in the womb by their mothers are not immune to hardships either. Almost all of these children are taken from their parents and kept in a hospital during the slow process of placement in a foster home. Calling for an expansion of foster care, Dr. Richard Sanchez, chair of the Department of Pediatrics of San Francisco's St. Luke's Hospital, told the story of the baby who spent two months of her short life in a hospital bed waiting for placement. She died two weeks after going to a foster home.

Within the next five years, witnesses testi-

fied, there will be an explosion of new AIDS cases in the inner cities. In addition, thousands who are now HIV positive but do not yet show signs of the disease will get sick. As new drugs prolong patients' lives, added complications — such as dementia — will arise. Federal funds will be needed to assist local governments and the private sector in retraining health professionals to cope with the special needs of people with AIDS. Most sufferers spend a relatively short time in the hospital; more home nursing and non-acute facilities are needed.

Many victims [sic] of the first wave of illness have become homeless as a result of housing or employment discrimination or the loss of health insurance. Residence programs have been

developed for these people. But new types of homelessness are arising as the disease hits people already on the margins of society who have mental health, alcohol or drug problems. Special housing programs have to be set up for these people, said Bob Prentice, project director of the Health Care for the Homeless Program in San Francisco.

"Substance abuse treatment might not always be the first priority for someone who has maybe a year to live," Prentice commented. "We will have to meet them on terms that might be very difficult for some who cannot get beyond 'Just say no' as the universal answer." •

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ACLU Commission on Gay and Lesbian Rights seeks a few good men and women

The American Civil Liberties Union Commission on Gay and Lesbian Rights recently held a day-long retreat to clarify and further define the mission of the commission for the next two years. Once again, the mission echoes the number-one priority of the ACLU of Oregon board of directors: the creation and protection of lesbian and gay civil rights. For the commission to lay the groundwork necessary to ensure passage of a lesbian and gay civil rights bill in the Oregon Legislature, commission membership must increase.

The commission is seeking a few good men and women from every corner of Oregon to join its ranks. It seeks individuals with a strong desire to work with and within all segments of the gay, lesbian and at-large community. Some of the specific skills sought are leadership ability, fundraising capabilities, and public relations and public education expertise. The commission meets approximately once a month and plans to hold meetings more frequently

outside the Portland metropolitan area. The commission is committed to having statewide geographic representation.

Persons who possess the needed skills, have a strong commitment to civil rights for all humans and are a current ACLU member — or are willing to become a member — are encouraged to apply for membership with a written statement of intent:

State the reasons why you want to be on the commission. Describe your experience with community organizing. Describe the strengths and specific skills you would bring to the commission.

Mail your responses to ACLU of Oregon, 705 Board of Trade Building, 310 SW 4th Ave., Portland, Ore. 97204. Applications must be received by January 15, 1988. For more information, call Jann Carson at 227-3186 (Portland), or Dave Fidanque at 345-6162 (Eugene).

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