

AIDS czar's resignation called for

Many AIDS organizations feel Kristine Gebbie is not exerting the leadership and independence necessary to effectively challenge the epidemic

by Bob Roehr

The National Association of People with AIDS called for the resignation of Kristine Gebbie as the national AIDS policy coordinator in a statement released May 11. Gebbie said, in an interview with the Associated Press, that she has no intention of stepping down.

"Gebbie has proven incapable of creating a significant role for the Office of National AIDS Policy. A concrete strategy to address the multiple challenges of the HIV epidemic has not been forthcoming," read the NAPWA statement. "In the face of this devastating epidemic, the lack of urgency that Gebbie brings to this office is unacceptable."

It continued, "President Clinton must take the lead in building both a national consensus and a political framework that will enable us to end the HIV epidemic. We believe the president must move quickly to invigorate the Office of National AIDS Policy and provide the following: visionary leadership; coordination and strategy; resources."

According to the NAPWA statement two things are vitally important. One is that the office be restructured "in such a way that it has power," the other is that a leadership profile be drawn up of the necessary characteristics for Gebbie's potential successor.

NAPWA reflected the concerns of many others when its criticism of both the structure of the office and Gebbie were announced last year. An effort has been made to work with Gebbie, but, nine months into her tenure, organization leaders say they see too few results.

It is still unclear how this will play out. Many of the AIDS and sexual minority organizations contacted voiced reservations about Gebbie and called for increased activity and leadership on her part.

ACT UP applauded the statement. It has opposed Gebbie from the day her name was announced, citing her record as secretary of health in Washington state on issues such as mandatory reporting of the names of those who test positive for HIV and the rationing of health care.

Gay and Lesbian Americans came out in support of the NAPWA position. "Kristine Gebbie isn't the main problem," said spokeswoman Miché Wheatley. "The problem is, President Clinton has not lived up to the promises he made during the campaign."

The conservative group Americans for a Sound HIV/AIDS Policy joined in support of the NAPWA position in a statement issued May 17.

It read in part: "As the epidemic continues to spread into more American communities, we need a bold, innovative, national strategy to limit the suffering that will be caused by this devastating epidemic. This has not been forthcoming from the Office of National AIDS Policy, under its current leadership."

ASAP president Shepherd Smith cited a meeting May 13 at the Food and Drug Administration concerning approval for Orasure, a new method of testing for HIV. He called Gebbie's representative at the meeting "very uninformed," and said the aide "took a middle-of-the-road position rather than giving strong support to those suffering most in this epidemic."

The American Foundation for AIDS Research was "not prepared to comment at this time," according to media relations director Mary Ann Caprino. She said any change in policy would likely take weeks to evolve.

The National Interfaith AIDS Network is still formulating its position. Executive director Rev. Kenneth South sent a letter to Gebbie two weeks ago, concerning the draft Action Agenda, that was highly critical of "the role and effectiveness" of the ONAP.

"We do not have an official position yet," said Marj Plum, who handles health issues for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. She said

the group had met with NAPWA and ACT UP on May 16 to discuss concerns and has talked with other AIDS organizations. Plum characterized the group's review as "an ongoing evaluation" rather than a definite timetable for making a decision.

Gregory Adams, a spokesman for the National Minority AIDS Council said, "We feel that at this point, the problem may very well be with the office itself rather than

with Kristine Gebbie. Unfortunately, there is no real way of knowing."

"I don't know whether asking for [Gebbie's] resignation is helpful at this point. It took Bill Clinton close to a year [from the time of his election] to fill the position," said Gregory King, spokesman for the Human Rights Campaign Fund.

Dan Bross, executive director of the AIDS Action Council, seemed to be walking a tight-rope. He was clearly frustrated with Gebbie, feeling that neither the structure of the office nor the person filling it were up to the challenge of HIV.

Bross used the example of Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders to demonstrate the type of leadership and independence he felt was needed.

Bross said that Gebbie "should be in there fighting right now" for those appropriations, but she is absent. "We certainly consider it her role. And I think people living with AIDS consider it her role. I would hope that the White House considers that to be her role, also. And that is what we are trying to get clarification on right now," Bross said.

He added, "I would not want to be unduly diverted into dealing with this Kristine Gebbie issue while AIDS funding is going down the tubes."



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