

Capitol Hill staffer wins discrimination suit

Bruce Taylor was fired last December from his job as press secretary to Rep. Barbara-Rose Collins (D-Mich.), two days after his partner died of AIDS. The congresswoman claimed the firing was part of a six-position cutback following Republican wins in the November elections.

The Office of Fair Employment Practices found that Taylor was terminated because it was perceived that he was HIV positive or had AIDS and would require time off for health reasons. This is a violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

"The victory is not just for me and my partner but for all caregivers throughout the country who are dealing with a loved one with a catastrophic illness," said Taylor.

The ruling calls for Collins to pay Taylor back wages through the end of July on his \$40,000 a year salary, plus associated legal expenses. It rejected awarding punitive damages. Collins' office said she would appeal the decision.

"We are pleased that he [Taylor] has been able to get redress," said Robert Raben, a member of the five-person steering committee of the Lesbian and Gay Congressional Staff Association and an employee of openly gay U.S. Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.).

Raben wanted to make clear that the only reason why Taylor had "legal standing" or protection was because of "the perception of HIV," and not because he was gay or black. However, "It would be disingenuous not to acknowledge that there is an overlap in many people's minds between being gay and perceived HIV status. So it resonates with us when we see somebody who gets redress on that basis."

He said the incident "brings to light the fact that discrimination goes on, sometimes, unfortunately, among people who are generally supportive" of lesbian and gay issues.

Bob Roehr

Council asks president for National AIDS Summit

The Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS, which held its first meeting July 27-28, is seen by many as President Clinton's last chance to "get it right" on AIDS.

Chairman Dr. Scott Hitt in his opening remarks noted "the indifference, avoidance and outright prejudice that have characterized our government's response to AIDS." He hoped that would change with decisive leadership from Clinton.

Hitt had driven the Advisory Council members with briefings, position papers, and conference calls prior to this meeting. Thus they were able to issue a seven-point paper, "Initial Steps for Presidential Action," at the end of their session.

The paper calls for the president "to use his personal leadership to raise the level of public education, compassion and concern by pledging to make the battle against AIDS one of the most visible and continuing priorities of his presidency." One specific is to hold a National Summit on AIDS by the end of the year.

"It has the potential to do a lot of good, particularly in the area of creating a greater understanding of what the epidemic is like now," said Alexander Robinson. He is a member of the Advisory Council and co-chair of the National Organizations Responding to AIDS. He was disappointed, however, that for lack of time "the details of that were not spelled out."

The Advisory Council said prevention efforts are underfunded and asked the president to make that a budget priority. But it has yet to answer one of the questions the president asked during his half-hour meeting with them—what are their priorities for prevention funding.

The topic produced one of the most heated exchanges of the session. Ben Schatz, executive

director of the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association, lambasted the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for not yet producing public service announcements targeting gay and bisexual men. The much touted series unveiled in January 1994 did not include a single PSA directed toward the largest single group of those infected with HIV.

The CDC representative cited possible political objections. Schatz responded, "Jesse Helms has already won, if you aren't doing it because you are afraid he will prevent it."

The Advisory Council members are keenly aware of the skepticism with which many view the Clinton administration's handling of AIDS. "I am not here to assuage the gay and lesbian community," said Schatz. "I'm here to push for action."

"I'm looking to prove the cynics wrong," said Robinson. "I'm not certain that is going to happen, but we are going to try."

"If the door is open, you make recommendations," said Hitt. But he is not prepared to wait very long for the president to move on their recommendations. "In October we will be able to tell," he said.

Bob Roehr

More 3TC made available

The Glaxo Wellcome pharmaceutical company has relaxed access requirements for its promising anti-HIV drug 3TC, which is awaiting Food and Drug Administration approval.

Due to alleged shortages of the drug, the company was providing 3TC only to people with fewer than 100 CD4 cells and limiting new enrollees to 350 per week, which had created a waiting list of more than two months.

Now there are 650 slots per week, and CD4 cells can be as high as 300. The drug is free until the FDA approves it for the market.

In trial studies, 3TC has been shown to substantially increase CD4 immune-system cells, to reduce HIV levels in blood cells by 99 percent, and to reduce levels of HIV in the bloodstream by 91 percent. These results, which have been shown to persist for at least one year (there have been no longer studies), occur only when 3TC is used in combination with AZT. It is theorized that when HIV mutates around AZT in an individual, it is then susceptible to 3TC, and that when it mutates around 3TC, it mutates in a specific direction that once again makes it susceptible to AZT.

The respected *Bulletin of Experimental Treatments for AIDS* says of the 3TC/AZT combination: "[It] produces the most pronounced and prolonged effect of any anti-HIV regimen yet studied in suppressing HIV replication and increasing CD4 counts. [It is] a remarkable combination."

Glaxo Wellcome had blamed the earlier severe shortages on inadequate production facilities. The company said it was remodeling a factory in England to produce vastly larger quantities of the drug.

Meanwhile, newer trial studies are hinting that 3TC and AZT taken together with a "protease inhibitor" can produce even more dramatic results. The protease inhibitors, of which there are several in trial studies, are an entirely new class of anti-HIV therapy. All previous therapies (AZT, ddI, ddC, d4T and 3TC) belong to the "nucleoside analog" class of drugs.

To get 3TC, one's doctor should phone 1-800-248-9757.

Rex Wockner

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