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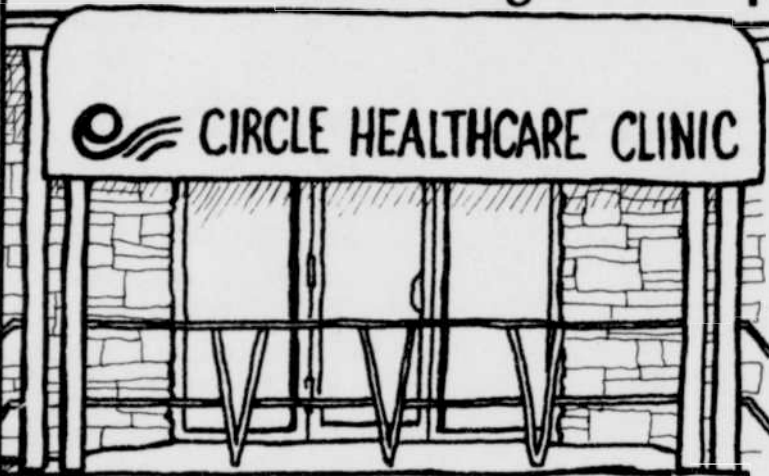
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national news

Rocky summit

*Camps report different views from the Dec. 6 White House
Conference on HIV and AIDS*

by Bob Roehr

We will not rest in peace, AIDS action now."
"Don't send us to our grave, veto cuts in Medicaid."
Those were two of the chants protesters used to greet invitees arriving for the White House Conference on HIV and AIDS held on Dec. 6.

Outside, about 200 East Coast activists braved the gray day with temperatures in the 30s and a blustery wind that cut to the bone. Those inside the ornate granite-and-marble Old Executive Office Building and two other locations in the White House complex were more likely to be on the payroll of a government or AIDS agency. In the morning session participants were assigned to a series of nine "working groups."

"While the current administration claims that Bill Clinton has done more than any president regarding AIDS, the truth is that his efforts fall far short of what is needed. Virtually all of his campaign promises—including that of implementing the recommendations of the two presidential commissions on AIDS—remain unfulfilled," stated the principal handout of the activist groups backing the protest.

It was followed by an explicit list of "50 actions President Clinton can take to fight AIDS." These focused on health care delivery, housing, research, immigration, education and prevention and, perhaps most importantly, the issue of leadership, of using the "bully pulpit" of the White House to make AIDS a priority for the nation.

Several inside participants joined protesters in Lafayette Park during the lunch break. One was Bill Freeman, executive director of the National Association of People with AIDS. He described the morning session he attended as "talking heads," and the conference itself as "a report card for what Bill Clinton has done on AIDS over the first three years." By the end of the day he issued a grade of C-minus.

Sean Strub, publisher of *POZ* magazine, was told that his views were "too controversial" for him to be invited. Only after wrangling was the magazine able to secure one press pass to the event. It was told, "No questions to the president, and all that sort of thing."

"Bob Hattoy [the AIDS poster boy of the 1992 Democratic National Convention and member of the administration] said he was told he would be fired," Strub said. "He would be out of a job if he came out and spoke here. Cleve Jones [founder of The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt] was told ahead of time that if he came out to join us, he would not be allowed back inside."

Hattoy was spotted with a group of other participants walking past the White House to the afternoon session at the Treasury Department. He said his morning session on treatment "went fine.... Fauci, Gallo, all the Nobels [Nobel Prize winners] were there." But when asked to cross the street to speak with others in the press he said, "I can't."

At the two-hour afternoon session President Clinton decried Republican proposals to reduce Medicaid (but not his own lesser reductions) as "a

stake in the heart of our effort to guarantee dignity to the people with AIDS in this country."

Most attending were encouraged by the words. But as Mark Barnes, executive director of the AIDS Action Council, noted, "The real test of his leadership is not a speech, it is what he does in budget negotiations with Congress."

The president announced support for review and reform of AIDS research. The process was mandated by 1993 legislation initiated by Congress and is well underway.

Winnie Stachelberg, lobbyist with the Human Rights Campaign, called this review crucial. She said Clinton "is willing to protect, give his stamp of approval to the Office of AIDS Research" at the National Institutes of Health when the entire NIH comes before Congress next year for reauthorization.

Clinton also vowed to create a task force on drug development and approval. This would replace a group that was headed up by Dr. Philip Lee, second in charge of the Department of Health and Human Services. The group lapsed in November.

New York activist Bob Lederer disrupted the close of the session and was cut off by the president. "All he has to offer is changing the boxes on the organizational chart," Lederer said outside on the sidewalk. Stachelberg called the meeting "the beginning of a dialogue that is terribly exciting and historic." It is a "first step" that must be continued. She believes the president "is ahead of his political handlers on this issue."

Ben Schatz is executive director of the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association and pushed for the conference as a member of the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS. "I think the president demonstrated, on a fundamental level, that he gets this issue and he cares about it," Schatz said. "It remains to be seen about the people surrounding him, whether they feel this was the beginning of an increased level of commitment, or if this was a bone to toss us."

Lederer charged, "This meeting is about politics and Bill Clinton's re-election." It was an interpretation shared by many both inside and outside the conference.

NAPWA's Freeman "felt extremely frustrated that I had participated in this huge love-in for the president. It is not necessary to hear the president say 'I feel your pain.' What is necessary is real leadership on this domestic Bosnia." More than 100,000 Americans have died of AIDS since Clinton took office.

For David Greer, spokesman for Log Cabin Republicans, the meeting was "about seeking campaign contributions, not a cure. The invitees are people who have given a lot of money."

"When people in Washington really want to get things done, they go bipartisan," he said. "What is the purpose of having an AIDS summit when Republicans have not been invited?"

Freeman worries that AIDS might become a more partisan issue. "When that happens, we allow AIDS to be used simply to make political hay, and we forego forging the kinds of coalitions essential to the strategic response to AIDS."



Protesters outside the conference

PHOTO BY BOB ROEHR