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national news

Clinton to ask for increase in AIDS spending

The Clinton administration plans to seek an additional \$165 million in its 1999 fiscal budget to help treat and care for people with AIDS.

The increase would mark a 14 percent rise in spending to assist people with the disease, and would raise total spending to slightly more than \$1.3 billion.

News of the proposed jump was leaked to the *New York Times* and appeared in the Dec. 30 edition.

An estimated \$100 million will go toward AIDS drug assistance programs, which help pay for new medications that help block development of the disease.

Some observers believe the increase is tied to the administration's failure to act on a promise Vice President Gore made last April to expand Medicaid.

Such a move would have provided earlier access to combination therapies to a greater number of people. But the White House dropped those efforts, saying it would be too costly.

"When that did not work, [the vice president and his office] were big advocates for doing something as an alternative," says AIDS funding lobbyist Alexander Robinson.

He adds, "While a \$100 million increase [for ADAP] is significant, it won't go very far to address what is a growing need."

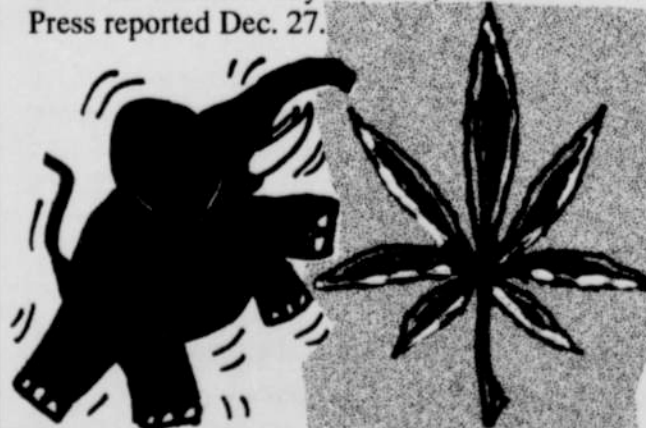
ADAP only pays for drugs and is limited to the amount of money appropriated each year. Medicaid provides a broader range of medical services. As an entitlement program, its funding is assured without spending caps.

Jeff Blum, policy analyst with Project Inform, sees the situation in purely political terms. He calls it an effort by the administration to prop up support for Gore within the gay community, come the Democratic presidential primary.

Daniel Zingale, executive director of the AIDS Action Council, says, "The bigger picture remains unaddressed. Access to drugs is one thing but if you don't have access to health care and a viral load test, it doesn't do you any good. We cannot pretend that these are a substitute for fixing the fundamental problem in Medicaid."

Pot proponent tries new tactic

One of California's foremost advocates for legalized marijuana said he will seek the Republican nomination for governor, a primary race that will pit him against the nemesis who wants to shut down his cannabis buyer's club, The Associated Press reported Dec. 27.



Dennis Peron, the 51-year-old founder of the club that supplies marijuana to terminally ill people, formally announced his intentions Dec. 26 to run in the June 2 primary.

He will be running against Attorney General Dan Lungren, who has tried to shut the club down.

"I'm running against my good buddy Danny, who is essentially trying to put me in prison for

life," Peron said after announcing that he already has gathered 1,500 signatures toward the 10,000 he will need to avoid the \$5,000 filing fee to enter the race.

Following a 1996 raid in which state agents seized more than 40 pounds of marijuana from the San Francisco Cannabis Buyer's Club, Lungren got an indictment in Alameda County charging Peron and five others with the felony sale and transportation of marijuana.

Peron says his club provides medical marijuana to AIDS and cancer patients and other seriously ill people who must battle nausea and other ailments, but the state claimed marijuana was being sold without any demonstration of a buyer's medical needs.

At the request of Peron and his codefendants, a judge in October moved the trial to San Francisco, saying there was "an appearance of improper forum-shopping" by Lungren's office.

Peron said he wants to "end the drug hysteria" by decriminalizing many drugs and building homes instead of jails.

Peron, a Vietnam vet, is a gay man who lost his longtime partner to AIDS. He is also coauthor of Proposition 215, which legalized the medicinal use of marijuana in California.

Queer concerns take center stage in nation's courts

According to the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, 1998 will see a record number of lesbian, gay and AIDS-related cases in the country's highest courts.



"The U.S. Supreme Court and other high-level courts are expected to address employment, the military, disability protections, family and other fundamental constitutional issues for lesbians, gay men and people with HIV in 1998," says Lambda legal director Beatrice Dohrn. "Never have the stakes been so high for the civil rights of our community."

More than 50 significant rulings are anticipated, including a decision from the Hawaii Supreme Court that may make civil marriage available to same-sex couples for the first time in this country.

For its part, Lambda is fighting several child custody and adoption rulings that discriminate against gay and lesbian families, and is coordinating amicus briefs for a U.S. Supreme Court case that will affect application of the Americans with Disabilities Act for people who are HIV-positive but asymptomatic. Additionally, Lambda and co-counsel are hoping to overturn Cincinnati's anti-gay ballot measure Issue 3, which last year was upheld by a three-judge panel despite the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling against Colorado's nearly identical Amendment 2.

Several employment discrimination cases are on the docket, including a Supreme Court appeal for Joseph Oncale, who says he is the victim of same-gender sexual harassment. California's protections for gay and lesbian workers, meanwhile, will come under scrutiny by a state appeals court in the spring.

Compiled by Christopher D. Cuttone and Bob Roehr

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