

# SHALALA SHUFFLE

**Health and Human Services admits under pressure that needle exchange works, but federal funding is not forthcoming** by Bob Roehr

**W**ith one hand, the Clinton administration officially lifted the ban on federal funding of needle exchange programs, which aim to reduce the spread of HIV. With the other hand, however, officials withheld funding from such programs.

Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala surrounded herself with the surgeon general and the directors of the federal National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at an April 20 Washington, D.C., news conference addressing needle exchange.

During the briefing she said the programs were "life-saving" interventions that require a "careful local design." (Literally dozens of studies have concluded that needle exchange pro-



Donna Shalala

grams can lead to a reduction in the rate of HIV transmission.)

But, she added, "We will not release federal funds at this point."

Shalala did not explain how federal funding and local design were incompatible.

Reaction to Shalala's pronouncement was swift.

"It is unconscionable that the administration acknowledges that needle exchange programs work and save lives, then turn their backs on people who are in need," said Daniel Zingale, executive director of the AIDS Action Council.

"At best this is hypocrisy, at worst it's a lie," charged R. Scott Hitt, chairman of the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS. "And no matter what, it's immoral."

The council issued a statement redoubling its call for federal funding of needle exchange programs as part of a comprehensive program of reducing new HIV infections. The statement called Shalala's action "akin to refusing to throw a life preserver to a drowning person." It also urged Clinton to "check his moral compass and then take bold action."

H. Alexander Robinson, a Washington AIDS lobbyist and chair of the PACHA committee on prevention, said, "Once again this administration has managed to do something that satisfies no one."

"Shalala abdicated her responsibility to protect the health of United States citizens today,"

charged James Loyce Jr., executive director of AIDS Project Los Angeles. "This egregious disregard for science and public health may sacrifice the lives of 33 Americans who will be infected by dirty needles each day on the altar of political expediency."

Sean Strub, founder and executive editor of POZ magazine, added, "The fact is, virtually every infant born with HIV and most of the women who have acquired HIV in recent years can credit Bill Clinton and Donna Shalala with their illnesses. This was a litmus test issue. If [Shalala] truly recognized the science and the efficacy of these programs, she should have been willing to resign over it or go public in favor of federal funding."

The negative feedback didn't end there. Longtime Clinton backer U.S. Rep. Nancy Pelosi, a California Democrat, said, "It defies



R. Scott Hitt

logic to determine a program's efficacy and then not fund the program, especially in the middle of an epidemic. The administration's decision shows a lack of political will in the midst of a public health emergency."

Winnie Stachelberg, political director of the Human Rights Campaign, said the decision "validated the politics of the Family Research Council, which wishes to play politics with people's lives."

Even opponents of needle exchange were displeased.

Republican Sen. John Ashcroft of Missouri blasted Shalala's half measure as "an intolerable message that it's time to accept drug use as a way of life."

He is running for the GOP presidential nomination and is thought by many to be the favorite of the Christian right wing.

A statement released in late April by U.S. Sen. Chuck Grassley, an Iowa Republican, said federal funding of needle exchange "would in reality use tax dollars and the authority of the federal government to push drug paraphernalia into already drug-ravaged inner cities. This is reckless and irresponsible."

Meanwhile, U.S. Sen. Paul Coverdell, a Georgia Republican, introduced a bill that would prevent the secretary from ever lifting the ban—an action that has the full backing of the Family Research Council.

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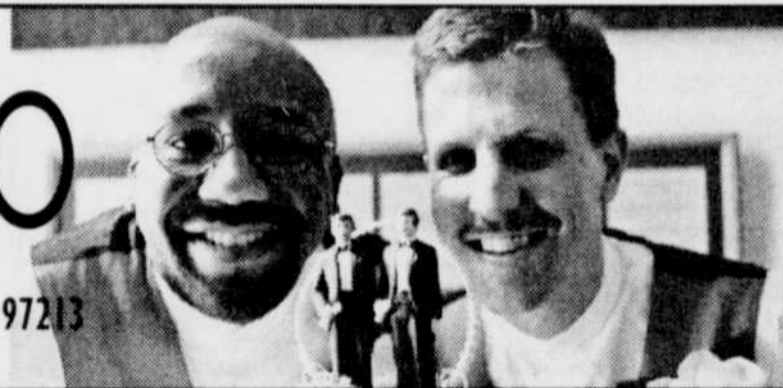
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