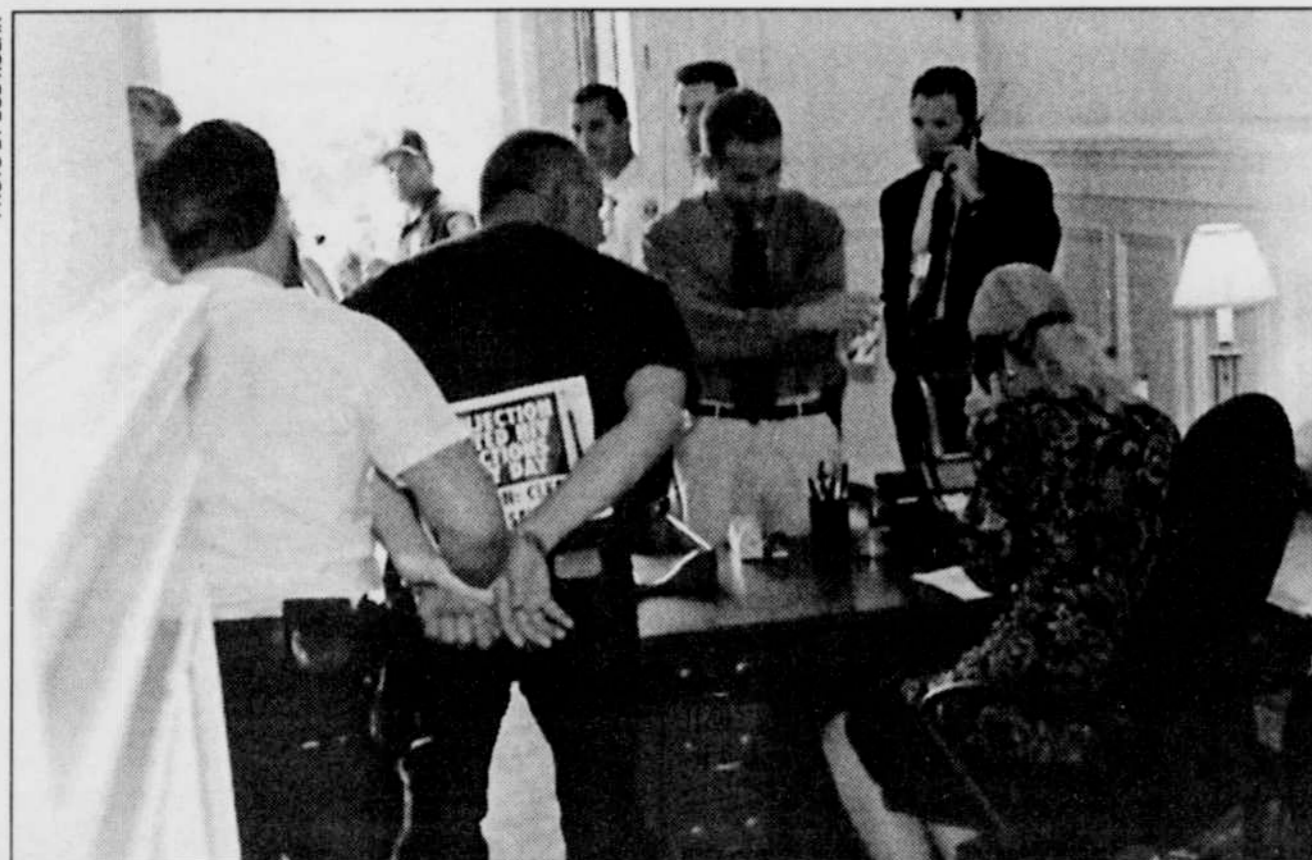


NATIONAL news

# ACTIVISTS SEIZE AIDS CZAR'S OFFICE

Ten people are arrested by the Secret Service following a brief sit-in at the Office of National AIDS Policy by Bob Roehr

PHOTO BY BOB ROEHR



Secret Service officers cart protesters away

**A** July 20 meeting with AIDS czar Sandra Thurman became the cover for seizing the Office of National AIDS Policy—if only for a brief period. Protesters chained themselves to desks in the office of President Bill Clinton's top AIDS adviser to protest the administration's refusal to allow federal funding of needle exchange programs, then uniformed members of the Secret Service arrested and removed the 10 protesters, most of whom are affiliated with ACT UP New York.

The meeting began normally enough. "We are here because we can no longer tolerate the hypocrisy that surrounds the issue of needle exchange," said Chris Lanier, coordinator of the National Coalition to Save Lives Now. "We ask that [ONAP] make a pledge, right now, to place human lives above the politics that have surrounded this issue."

"No," replied Todd Summers, ONAP's deputy director. "Because it is not [Thurman's] place to do that. Sandy is employed by the president to provide policy."

Lanier then charged, "The president's decision not to lift the funding ban makes permanent the AIDS crisis in this country."

He further criticized Clinton for failing to pledge to veto all legislation containing a permanent ban on federal funding of needle exchange.

Summers explained that Clinton was on record as pledging to veto a stand-alone bill, but said if a ban was added as an amendment to another bill, a veto would be more difficult.

"This office is pointless. There is no purpose to continuing this sham of pretending to fight against AIDS when the president continuously will not make the tough decisions necessary to stop the virus," said Lanier. "That has resulted in the loss of tens of thousands of lives, and it will continue to escalate."

Thurman arrived late, apologizing for her tardiness.

"Are you willing to publicly denounce the president's policy?" asked Lanier.

"No, I'm not," she said. "We have been over this."

Members of the party then quietly rose and scooted to preassigned stations as Lanier said: "We've waited for years for somebody to take a stand on this issue. We are now going to seize this office and try and make a statement ourselves."

Thurman responded: "I think that is fine. You all know how open we have been to you, and how difficult the conversations have been for a variety of reasons."

She argued that Clinton anticipated Congress would move to restrict funding of needle exchange.

Lanier countered, "Had the president stood up, we would have had a different situation with Congress."

The dialogue continued for some minutes, then Thurman and Summers excused themselves to step outside and confer with Secret Service agents.

Meanwhile, four activists chained themselves to Thurman's conference table. Others plastered signs on the walls and windows, and some were sending their message through an open second-floor window via a bullhorn.

The Secret Service moved quickly and professionally, generally with cooperation from the protesters. A bolt cutter sliced through the chains like butter, and within 15 minutes the protesters were removed from the office.

In an exclusive interview while the arrests were taking place, Thurman said: "Once they occupy a federal building, it is out of my hands. The Secret Service made that very clear to me."

The 15-year veteran of the fight against AIDS was clearly troubled by the incident, at times appearing on the verge of tears. She said she has worked very closely with activists over the years and feels "a similar frustration in getting people to focus on this issue."

"It makes our dialogue in the future more difficult," she said, "because now, every time we have a meeting like this, it is going to mean that I will have to operate in a different way. I won't be able to have the same kind of open-door policy that I've always had. It makes our ability to dialogue more difficult. But this will not make us close the doors."



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