

The Bush administration is shuffling the deck of players dealing with HIV. AIDS czar Scott Evertz is leaving that position to become a senior adviser on global aspects of the epidemic to Health Secretary Tommy Thompson.

Joseph O'Neill is taking his place as head of what officially is called the Office of National AIDS Policy. The White House announcement came July 19.

O'Neill was chief administrator of the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency Act, which this year is distributing \$1.9 billion in federal funds. Like Evertz, he is a gay man and is in a 13-year relationship.

A career civil servant, O'Neill is uniquely well qualified for the job. He received his medical training at University of California at San Francisco and degrees in business administration and public health from University of California at Berkeley. He served as medical director of the Chase Brexton Clinic, which was established to serve the gay and lesbian community and has evolved to become a large provider of AIDS services in Baltimore.

Evertz reportedly is delighted to be leaving the political hot seat where he has served since April 2001. He has been attacked from the left for not doing enough and from the right for doing too much.

"President Bush continues to lead where others merely offered speeches and rhetoric," said Rich Tafel, Log Cabin Republicans executive director. "With Scott Evertz and Joe O'Neill, we have two of the best-qualified people in the nation on the president's team fighting the AIDS epidemic both at home and abroad."

MUSICAL CHAIRS

Will AIDS czar shakeup lead to a renewed commitment in fighting the disease? by Bob Roehr

O'Neill's appointment "is great news," said Marsha Martin, executive director of the AIDS Action Council, a national association of service organizations. She served as a special assistant on HIV to Health Secretary Donna Shalala.

"If we are going to look for symbolic gestures, this is one. We are very happy," Martin said.

With Evertz moving over to the international side, "You have two gay men in leadership roles on domestic and international HIV policy," Martin added. "That's a good thing."

Maureen O'Leary, Gay and Lesbian Medical Association executive director, found O'Neill's résumé "encouraging." But she remains "concerned about public funds going to 'abstinence-only' programs to reduce transmission of HIV and STDs. Not only has this approach proven to be far less effective than programs that also include safe-sex education, these programs demand 'abstinence until marriage'—a Catch-22 for same-sex couples who are denied that right."

Human Rights Campaign spokesman David



Conservatives such as Patricia Ware might have been responsible for the reassignment



Scott Evertz (left) meets with President Bush

Smith claimed, "The pro-abstinence crowd within the administration is carrying the day." HRC believes that Evertz's pro-gay and pro-prevention stances made him a target of the right and that he was moved aside by

conservatives such as Patricia Ware.

The main problem with that interpretation is that the Bush White House has turned a deaf ear to the rantings of groups such as the Family Research Council. And reports indicate Ware herself is being reassigned from her duties as executive director of the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS, though that change has not been finalized.

Martin was "surprised" to learn Ware will be leaving. "I have no criticism of Pat and her work. Even if our perspectives were different, she listened and she invited us into conversations."

Perhaps the biggest factor behind Evertz's

move is that he simply did not seem to be a good fit for the job. One initial knock on his appointment was that he came to Washington with limited knowledge of government-funded HIV programs and the policies and personalities that dominated the action.

He seemed to make insufficient progress in mastering control of those details.

Evertz's personal style did not seem amenable to the pace of multitasking and schmoozing that had brought plaudits for his predecessor, Sandy Thurman. He gained a reputation for not returning phone calls, a prime responsibility for an office whose purpose is coordination. He was scheduled to brief the advisory council at its June meeting but never made an appearance, which miffed a natural body of allies.

Some say the administration actually is upgrading the position of AIDS czar with O'Neill. He is the first physician to hold the post, he knows the federal bureaucracy inside out, and he is a proven, dynamic communicator.

The two-way loyalty of Thompson and Evertz, both with roots in Wisconsin politics, likely precluded making those claims. Insiders will be watching closely to see whether the Office of National AIDS Policy staff and budget grow under O'Neill. ■

BOB ROEHR is a free-lance reporter based in Washington, D.C.

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