

NATIONAL news

AIDS Watch 2003 is about delivering the message to Congress that "these are real people using real programs." Increased funding is crucial to keeping people alive, said Terje Anderson, executive director of the National Association of People with AIDS, which helped organize the event held from May 18 to 20 in Washington, D.C.

The opening day was filled with briefing and training sessions, the next two with visits to members of Congress. Anderson said the presence of more than 400 advocates was "an incredibly powerful statement of your commitment to these issues" in light of the financial difficulties that many organizations are facing.

"Tax cuts have direct implications on how much money is going to be available for HIV/AIDS programs," explained Laura Hanen, National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors government relations director. She saw the smaller \$350 billion package proposed by the Senate as better than the House version, which was more than twice as large.

Ernest Hopkins, a lobbyist for the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, was pleased with the recent "thoughtful dialogue" in both chambers in passing an international AIDS bill. "Your job is to bring it back to talking about what is happening in your local community," he said. "You need to focus on why these programs are important to you at home...don't focus on the large numbers" in the total appropriation.

"You can't take the support of Democrats for granted," one audience member cautioned. That person believed they "rolled over" on recent votes and supported abstinence-based prevention programs.

Hopkins told how one constituent recently

EYES ON THE HILL

AIDS Watch 2003 aims to send a message to a reluctant Congress by Bob Roehr

took a representative to task for becoming quiet and not as visible in the media on AIDS issues as she had been in the past. The congresswoman was shocked to hear the evaluation, he said, and "really got it."

One of the greatest political accomplishments has been to make AIDS a bipartisan issue. Hopkins urged advocates to continue framing their efforts within that context. "Don't let members of either party off the hook; none of them are doing enough on the domestic front. Make it a leadership issue. They get the devastation of the disease [from the international discussion]; now bring it back home."

"Housing equals health," said AIDS Alabama CEO Kathie Hiers, offering a short briefing on the Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS program. A recent survey of the homeless in Birmingham found that 15 percent knew they were infected with HIV. "How can people adhere to a difficult medical therapy without a roof over their head?" she asked.

Ross Baker of Lifelong AIDS Alliance in Seattle demonstrated a "prevention works dance" as an animated aid to remembering the major messages in lobbying: Prevention is cost-effective; say "no" to abstinence-only programs; more money for vaccine research and needle exchange; and people of color are affected disproportionately. He closed by forming his arms into a big "C," which stands for condoms, community-based

programs and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Hopkins reviewed the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency Act programs. "We need significant increases for all of them," he said.

According to Hopkins, the largest increase should be for the AIDS Drug Assistance Program, where an additional \$280 million is needed. Some 14 states already have imposed restrictions on access to ADAP, and more are likely to follow. "This is about people's access to life-and-death services," Hopkins said.

Robert Greenwald said people often take Medicaid for granted because it's an entitlement program and not AIDS-specific; however, "it is an increasingly important part of the HIV health care delivery system." He criticized the Bush administration proposal to "reform" the program by capping expenditures, calling it essentially a gutting of Medicaid. "The way to solve the budget crisis is not on the backs of poor people who need health care."

One piece of good news to come out of the briefing was that White House efforts to force the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious

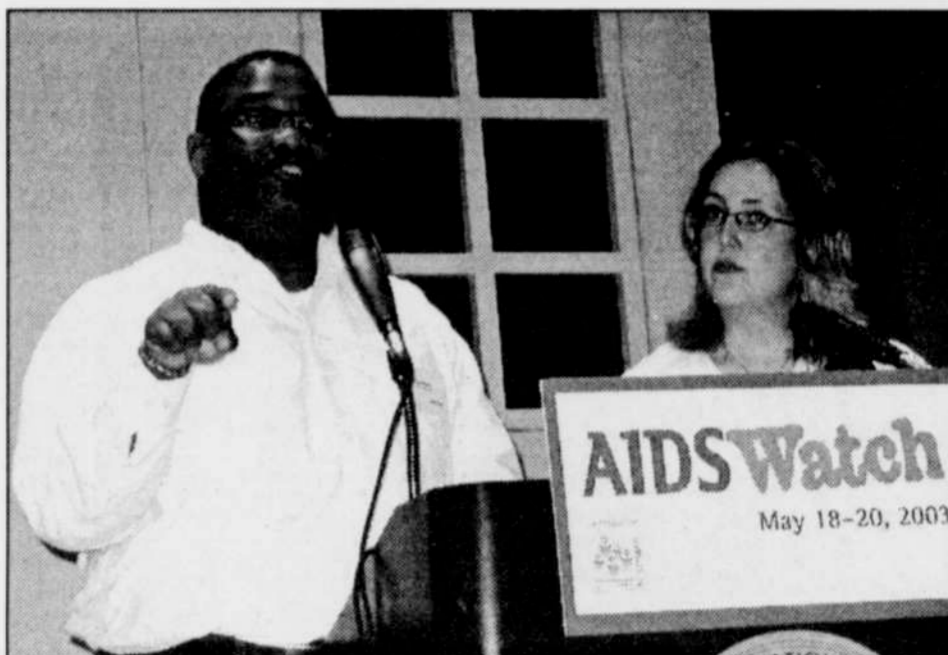


PHOTO BY BOB ROEHR

Ernest Hopkins and Laura Hanen brief advocates during AIDS Watch 2003 last month in Washington, D.C.

Diseases to purchase \$233 million of anthrax vaccine appear to have been derailed. U.S. Sens. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., and Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, wrote a joint letter expressing their displeasure with the proposal, and it appears to have worked. That money would have come out of current appropriations for research grants. The institute funds the greatest portion of HIV research grants by the National Institutes of Health.

Anderson urged the audience members to "stay on message and not get sucked into minutia" when visiting with members of Congress and their staffs. "We don't want Congress writing the rules; when they do, we get abstinence-only" prevention programs, he said. "We want them to write the check, and then we will work with the experts to make sure the check gets spent well." □

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

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