

# OPINION

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## HIV/AIDS Hits Close to Home Get over the fears and get treatment

BY MARC H. MORIAL

World AIDS Day recently served to remind us of the global as well as local health problem of HIV/AIDS. Major progress has been made in terms of medical treatment prolonging the lives of AIDS victims and those with HIV, but the disease is still alive and well in the world as well as the United States, especially among blacks.

The United Nations estimates that 25 million people have died of AIDS worldwide since AIDS first reared its ugly head in the United States in 1981.

In our nation's capital, the District of Columbia, one in 20 D.C. residents are estimated to have HIV and one in 50 to have AIDS. Not quite the one in eight rate of South Africa but give them a few decades.

According to a recent D.C. report, 12,500 District of Columbia residents have HIV or AIDS. Of the 3,300 new cases between 2001 and 2006, 80 percent were among African-American and 37 percent contracted through heterosexual sex. Overall, AIDS cases increased 43 percent -- epidemic levels, setting off alarm bells among blacks and public health officials.

Part of the reason why African-Americans are reluctant to get tested is the perceived stigma of having HIV or AIDS. That bears out to some extent in the District of Columbia, where over 70 percent of D.C. residents with HIV, a disproportionate number of them black, waited too long to be tested and saw their HIV turn into AIDS within a year of diagnosis. That compares to 39 percent nationwide.

When was the last time you got tested for HIV? Have you ever been tested? If not, shame on you.

"Knowing your HIV status is a fundamental responsibility for every black person," writes Phill Wilson,



son, executive director of The Black AIDS Institute in Los Angeles who has been HIV-positive for more than a quarter of a century. He makes an impassioned plea on the organization's Web site for blacks to "get over" their fears and "get on" with treatment.

In the Urban League movement, 23 of our affiliates have programs aimed at reducing the risk of transmission of the disease within the black community. The Urban League of Greater Oklahoma runs a program designed to increase HIV/AIDS awareness among ex-offenders and senior citizens.

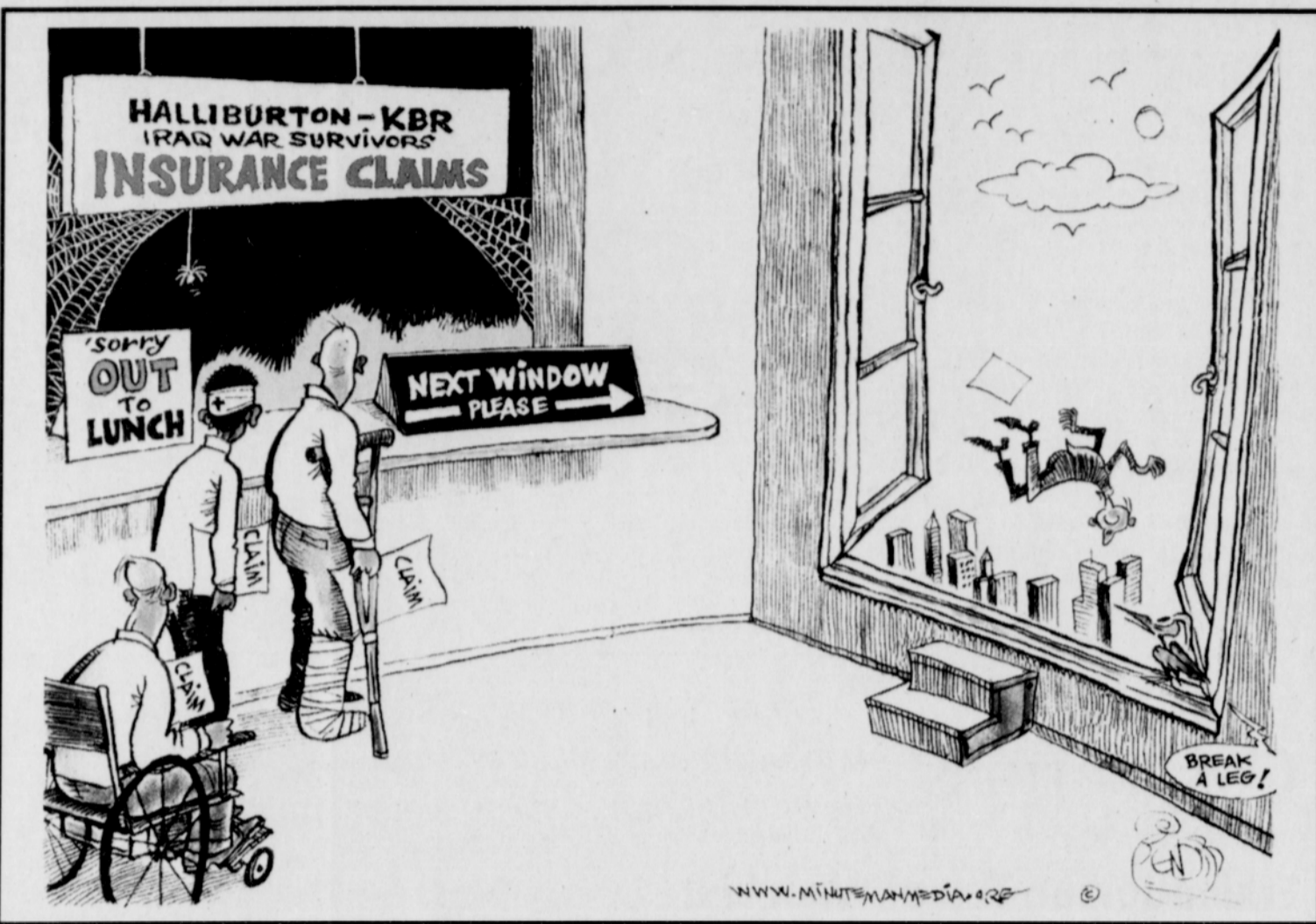
Further south, our Dallas affiliate offers an AIDS prevention program that has served 1,200 minority youths between the ages of 12 and 19 and shows them how to cut high-risk behaviors attributable to the use of drugs and alcohol and how to have safe sex, among other things. The affiliate also offers a program for drug-using adults over 18 that has served 925 people. And the Urban League of Hampton Road provides case-management services to minorities diagnosed with HIV/AIDS to improve the quality and length of their lives.

African Americans cannot wait around for the government and/or society to come to their rescue and save them from HIV/AIDS. The black community must look within itself to resolve this crisis.

"When we have the courage to take action, we see results. When we wait for others to come to our rescue, well... can anyone one say New Orleans or Katrina?" Wilson notes.

He's got a point. Solving this crisis starts with encouraging all blacks to get tested and treated, if necessary. In the words of Wilson, "get over it and get on with it."

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League



## Finally, a Step Toward Racial Justice

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

### Battle isn't over

Passed in the mid-1980s, federal drug-sentencing laws forced judges to deliver fixed sentences to individuals convicted of a drug-related offense, regardless of their direct role in the crime or circumstances surrounding the event.

The laws demonstrated a clear bias towards offenders convicted in crack-cocaine related cases, many of whom were African-American and from impoverished, urban neighborhoods. A little over 20 years later, the Supreme

Court has issued a ruling that gives judges much more power when sentencing drug offenders.

With this new freedom, judges can use their influence to encourage rehabilitation and education, saving taxpayers billions and turning around the lives of many young people of color.

Ten years after the sentencing laws were enacted, the average federal drug sentence for African-Americans was 49 percent higher than that of whites, the number of women in prison for drug offenses increased by 421 percent and there was a more than 80 percent increase in the federal prison population.

Under the previous law, a dealer with five grams of crack cocaine received the same punishment as one

who had 500 grams of powder cocaine; a 100-to-1 disparity. Supporters of the inequitable sentencing claimed crack cocaine was more dangerous than powder cocaine and should therefore come with stricter sentences. Studies later showed that crack cocaine was no more dangerous than powdered cocaine.

The recent Supreme Court ruling says the federal sentencing guidelines should be used to advise judges, not bind them to sentences that are clearly unfair.

The guidelines are now but one factor trial judges have to consider when handing down a sentence. Judges are now able to reduce prison sentences for crack cocaine related crimes, ending a two-decades long racially biased sentencing

policy that put thousands of black men behind bars, limiting their futures and weakening the black family and community.

With this ruling, the Supreme Court has taken a first step towards racial justice. The battle, however, is not over. Congress must work to monitor the nation's courts and ensure that sentencing across the country is equitable. If disparities are found, then new laws -- fair laws -- must be crafted. While there is still work to be done, this is a positive first step towards a balanced and fair criminal justice system.

Judge Greg Mathis is national vice president of Rainbow PUSH and a national board member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

### Letter to the Editor

## Ignoring Intelligence

If there is anything we should have learned by going into Iraq, it is that we must not presume

our president will listen to intelligence that is offered to him by others and will be honest

with us about it.

Stephen Hadley, National Security Advisor, has stated that Bush was told in August or September that we have intelligence indicating that Iran had halted its weapons program, and in fact that apparently happened in 2003!

This means that our president is pushing us into war with Iran, while ignoring the intelligence he's been given, just as he did when he convinced us we needed to invade Iraq!

Whether our president is simply lying in order to once again convince us, or simply believes he knows better than those who are well paid to find out, we must not let him take us into another ill-fated war!

Barbara Weaver  
Beaverton

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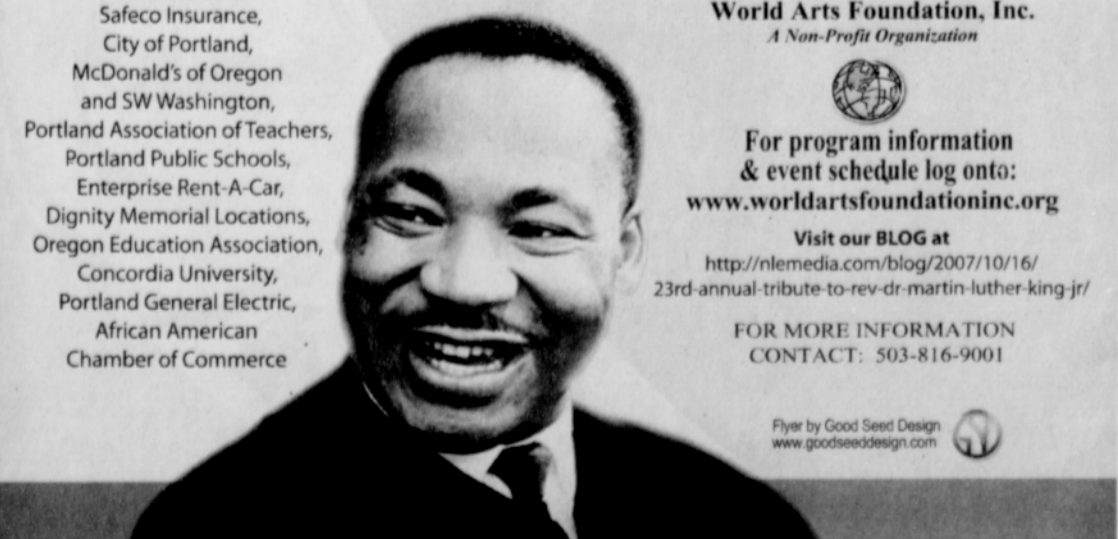
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