

AIDS Foundation **O F C H I C A G O**

State Government Priorities for 2001

Listed below are the AIDS Foundation of Chicago's advocacy priorities for Illinois state government in 2001. They encompass the best-known strategies to slow the spread of HIV, efforts to meet the needs of HIV-positive people, and systemic changes needed to improve the state's response to the AIDS epidemic. AFC will work with the Illinois General Assembly, Ryan Administration officials, and other entities and supporters to advance these issues throughout the year.

Please join us in championing the following goals:

Expanding access to sterile syringes in order to prevent HIV transmission. In Illinois, 70% of AIDS cases among women and 95% of pediatric AIDS cases are linked to syringe sharing among injection drug users. Syringe sharing is a risk behavior that is frequently unknown to the injection drug-user's sexual partners, including women who become both pregnant and HIV-positive. In response to the overwhelming scientific proof that increased access to sterile syringes results in decreased HIV transmission without increasing drug use, AFC is actively promoting a law that would allow adults to purchase sterile syringes without a prescription, and decriminalize sterile syringe possession for adults. AFC also advocates the eradication of all government bans on needle-exchange programs, and the inclusion of AIDS prevention education and drug treatment information in all syringe access programs.

Promoting voluntary HIV counseling and testing services among high-risk populations. AFC supports free, anonymous and confidential counseling and testing as a critical way to reach individuals at high-risk with prevention education, as well as appropriate referral services for those who test HIV-positive. Voluntary—documented with written consent—HIV antibody testing that is informed by adequate counseling is a valuable medical practice. Mandatory testing wastes resources, infringes on privacy rights, and alienates individuals at high-risk from seeking HIV testing or treatment.

Ensuring a strong and accessible AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP). ADAP provides approximately 3600 uninsured and low-income Illinoisans with life-prolonging HIV medications at no charge every month. AFC will work to ensure that there is sufficient state and federal funding for the drug assistance program, thereby ensuring that people with HIV have equal and equitable access to HIV medication, regardless of income or their ability to access prescription drug coverage. AFC advocates shortening the process for adding new FDA-approved medications to Illinois' ADAP plan. AFC also encourages the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) to reconvene an advisory group of community members, program consumers, HIV+ people and AIDS advocates to provide information and feedback on ADAP policies and operating procedures.

Maintaining non-name-based HIV case reporting. Studies show that, because of persistent AIDS stigma and discrimination, individuals at high risk (particularly gay men and injection drug users) may avoid or delay HIV testing when name reporting is required, for fear of being identified as HIV-positive to government officials. Any obstacle to testing is highly problematic as testing serves two important roles in efforts to control the epidemic: providing prevention education to individuals living with and at-risk for HIV, and informing those who are HIV-positive of their treatment options. In response to community opposition of name reporting, the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) established a non-name-based reporting system on a trial basis in 1999. In 2001, IDPH will evaluate the trial system and determine whether to keep it permanently or switch to a name-based system. The results of a recent AFC report showed that the Illinois system is performing better than states that track HIV by name. The report also documented implementation irregularities and raised concerns with evaluation plans. AFC is calling on IDPH to reconvene its HIV Surveillance Working Group, revise evaluation criteria, and implement two evaluations of the program: one to measure whether the system was implemented as intended, and another to determine if the system is meeting important public health goals.

Addressing the treatment needs of drug users. The use of substances such as alcohol and illicit drugs has been shown to contribute to sexual and drug-use practices that put individuals at risk for HIV infection. AFC believes that all individuals seeking treatment for substance use problems should receive such services immediately. Specifically, AFC supports “drug treatment on demand” as a critical component to reducing HIV transmission among injection drug users (IDUs), their sexual partners and their children. AFC also advocates for a variety of treatment services, including inpatient/outpatient abstinence-based programs, harm reduction counseling and services, sterile syringe access through non-prescription purchasing, and needle exchange.

Increasing funding for effective HIV prevention strategies. An estimated 800,000-900,000 individuals in the United States are living with HIV, and an estimated 40,000 new HIV infections occur each year. A sound government response to the expanding AIDS epidemic must ensure adequate funding for prevention education. AFC supports community-based, population-specific prevention initiatives as a key component of efforts to reduce new HIV infections. Increased funding for HIV prevention would provide tremendous cost savings by averting new infections that would have otherwise resulted in costly expenditure to government health and social service programs and losses to productivity.

Providing integrated services for people with STDs and HIV. Individuals infected with sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are almost five times more likely to contract or spread HIV than are people without any sexually transmitted diseases. By integrating STD and HIV outreach, counseling, testing and treatment services, hundreds of new HIV infections could be prevented. AFC supports efforts to expand STD treatment to include offering HIV counseling, testing and treatment, and also supports all efforts to incorporate STD prevention education within the context of HIV prevention and treatment. Increased funding is needed to expand proven and effective STD and HIV prevention strategies.

Expanding Medicaid eligibility for HIV-positive individuals. Medicaid is a state-federal program for low-income, aged, blind, and/or disabled Illinoisans. Current Medicaid rules

prevent low-income, uninsured HIV-positive people from accessing Medicaid coverage until they are disabled by AIDS. AFC believes a humane and more cost-effective policy would allow income-eligible, asymptomatic HIV-positive people to access Medicaid coverage prior to becoming disabled by AIDS. This would allow such HIV-positive individuals to access the medical care that is widely recommended, which can postpone or avoid the onset of AIDS, and which can enormously increase the quality of life for people living with HIV.

Providing health care coverage for the uninsured and under-insured. Many small businesses — particularly those with employees who are living with HIV or other chronic diseases — cannot provide health insurance to their workers, due to the high cost of premiums and prescription drugs benefits, leaving thousands of workers in Illinois uninsured and dependent on publicly funded health services. Meanwhile, a disproportionate number of people with HIV and other chronic illnesses lack affordable health care coverage or coverage that includes access to prescription medications. Until health care is treated as a basic human right, those living with chronic and terminal illnesses will continue to face inordinate obstacles in accessing adequate and high-quality health care. Legislation should increase access to adequate and high-quality health care for all, and especially for those with disabilities and chronic health problems.

The AIDS Foundation of Chicago is Illinois' leading advocate for people with and at risk for HIV/AIDS and the organizations on which they depend. AFC strives to ensure that Illinois elected and appointed officials do all they can to stop the spread of HIV and that people living with HIV/AIDS receive the services they need and deserve. In addition, AFC works to protect the civil rights of HIV-positive individuals and pursues strategies to reduce AIDS stigma and discrimination.