

AFC in the News

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Guest Editorial: Who Will Be the AIDS President?

By Mark Ishaug

And they're off. With Iowa victories under their belts, political sensations Barack Obama and Mike Huckabee have the winds at their backs as they campaign on messages of change and conciliation. But whether Obama becomes the Hope President or Huckabee the Faith President, the question many health care-minded voters are asking is: Who will be the AIDS president?

Sure, it's not as sexy as branding yourself the Education President or the Environmental President, but a chief executive who supports science-based approaches to halt the spread of HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, might just be hailed as the savior of a generation.

That's because twenty six years into the epidemic of our lifetime, the United States still has no comprehensive strategy to prevent HIV transmission, increase access to HIV care, and reduce racial disparities in the epidemic.

Nevermind that the U.S. requires nations that apply for billions of dollars in federal aid under the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief to develop such plans. Or that since its discovery more than a quarter century ago, HIV/AIDS has infected at least 1.5 million Americans and killed more than 538,000—nearly three times the population of Des Moines, Iowa.

It is estimated that one quarter of Americans who are HIV-positive do not know it. Many are diagnosed too late to benefit from early medical care and half of those who are eligible for antiretroviral treatment—the life-extending “drug cocktails”—do not receive this treatment, according to the Open Society Institute.

So where do the White House hopefuls stand on HIV/AIDS?

AIDSVote.org offers insight. The nonpartisan voter and candidate education project features a poll conducted by three leading AIDS organizations—Housing Works, Gay Men's Health Crisis and the AIDS Foundation of Chicago—of the presidential hopefuls on pressing AIDS-related issues.

Of the 16 major party candidates in contention back in November—eight Democrats and eight Republicans—only six responded to the poll. Not one reply came from a Republican.

The three leading Democratic candidates—Illinois Sen. Barack Obama, former Sen. John Edwards and Sen. Hillary Clinton—support ending the ban on federal funding for needle exchange, a scientifically proven intervention to reduce the spread of HIV without increasing drug use.

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All three have also pledged to craft a national AIDS strategy with explicit benchmarks if elected, as well as committing at least \$50 billion by 2013 for the global fight against HIV/AIDS.

Of the leading Republicans, Huckabee, a Baptist minister, is the only one who has committed to developing a national AIDS strategy. His pledge, however, came in a Dec. 8 statement in which he sought to clarify remarks he made in 1992 that people living with HIV should be quarantined, according to a separate analysis of the presidential candidates by The Black AIDS Institute.

Whoever moves into 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue in 2009 should strive to be something the world has yet to see: the U.S. president who tackled both domestic and global AIDS.

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