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HIV/AIDS Lobby Days: 120 call for sound policies

By: Amy Wooten

The eighth annual HIV/AIDS Lobby Days was a "huge success," according to the event's organizers.

Over 120 people rallied in the rotunda of the State Capitol on April 2, calling for sound HIV/AIDS policies. Wearing T-shirts emblazoned with this year's "Mission: Possible" theme, HIV/AIDS advocates spoke to their state legislators about critical pieces of HIV/AIDS legislation. Joining the advocates during the rally were state Sen. David Koehler, D-Peoria, and Reps. Greg Harris, D-Chicago, Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, and Cynthia Soto, D-Chicago.

AIDS Foundation of Chicago's Jim Merrell, who organized the event, told *Windy City Times* that Lobby Days was extremely successful this year. In addition to the rally, roughly 75 advocates were trained April 1. That evening, AFC also honored HIV/AIDS activists for their hard work during an awards ceremony. Advocate Marla Francisco, a client representative for an HIV consortium, was given the 4th annual Mary Dixon Advocacy Award.

"We had lots of positive legislator engagement," on three issues, Merrell said. Those issues were medical expansion for low-income Illinoisans; a bill that would help reduce drug overdoses by removing barriers to distribute a drug that reverses opiate overdoses; and a request for a \$2 million appropriation for expanded voluntary HIV testing as a part of routine medical care.

Roughly 60 percent of this year's participants were new to the event, added AIDS Foundation of Chicago's Johnathon Briggs, who also participated.

"I did feel as though I engaged in meaningful conversation with legislators, especially Rep. Greg Harris, who understand the issues and encouraged the advocates to speak up for increased funding for life-saving HIV/AIDS policies in spite of the fiscal pressures facing Illinois," Briggs told *Windy City Times*. "As my grandmother used to say, 'A closed mouth doesn't get fed.'"

"I do feel it was a success because the presence of the people was there," said activist Juliet Jones, who also spoke at the rally. "Definitely, our voices were heard."

For those who missed the bus Downstate for this year's successful event, AFC encourages individuals to contact their legislators to advocate for good HIV/AIDS policies. See www.aidschicago.org/advocacy/news_3_31_08.php .