

COMMENTARY

Ending AIDS epidemic calls for raising voices, awareness

Special to Sentinel-Voice

It's as if it has never happened. Or maybe it's as if we really believe that if we ignore it, it will just go away. Or maybe it's as if we were victims of our own conspiracy of silence.

However you want to explain it, the African-American community is in the midst of a state of emergency and we won't even talk about it.

Today 300,000 to half a million African-Americans have HIV or AIDS, and AIDS is the leading cause of death among black people ages 25 - 44.

While African-Americans are 13 percent of the U.S. population, we are nearly half of the AIDS cases. Unless dramatic changes take place, in another seven years more than 60 percent of the AIDS cases will be among African-Americans, but still we are silent. AIDS is a preventable disease. There doesn't have to be even one case anymore.

All we have to tell our young, middle-aged and old people is to abstain or have safe sex. All we have to tell our people who are addicted to drugs is not to share needles, or we can provide them with clean needles so that the disease is not transmitted. We can stop the HIV/AIDS epidemic in our community right now. But we have to talk about it.

This summer the television version of Stephen King's book *The Stand* has been re-playing. The book begins with an attack of a deadly virus and has a part where the government tries to fool the people about the deadly epidemic which is killing millions of people. Newscasters say it's a bad flu.

Sometimes it seems like the African-American community is living in a similar fallacy as we watch our loved ones, our neighbors, our co-workers and our friends get sick and die. We never acknowledge what that person is suffering from and we pretend that AIDS is just that "gay person's disease."

Civil Rights Journal

By Bernice Powell Jackson



The problem is that AIDS is a disease which requires us to talk about sex and drugs. Our churches don't want to talk about sex and drugs. Our civil rights organizations don't want to talk about sex and drugs. Our community centers don't want to talk about sex and drugs. Our politicians don't want to talk about sex and drugs. Even many parents don't want to talk about sex and drugs. Thus, thousands of our people are getting sick and many are dying.

The problem is that we who are African-American are trapped in the decade-old image of HIV/AIDS being a gay disease when the fact is that more than half of the women who now have HIV/AIDS are African-American women who have contracted the disease from their husbands or male partners. Heterosexual sex is now responsible for more black women contracting this deadly disease than needles. Today's victim of HIV/AIDS is likely to be a heterosexual black woman who does not use drugs.

Today's victim is also likely to be a heterosexual teenager of color who does not use drugs. Our teenagers are one of the fastest growing infected groups and while we argue about whether to tell them about protected sex or abstinence, thousands of them are becoming infected and thousands more will die as they infect others.

Today's victim of HIV/AIDS is likely to be an older black woman past the child-bearing stage, who doesn't think about HIV/AIDS or protected sex. This is also one of the fastest-growing groups of people infected with this disease.

Not only is HIV/AIDS a preventable disease, it is also a treatable one. But the medication only works well if the disease is caught early. The conspiracy of silence keeps that early detection from happening. Plus, the medication is expensive, so that for many it is unaffordable. But without the detection, the person with HIV/AIDS can't even explore possible ways of paying for the medication. Thousands of black folks are missing an opportunity for treatment.

Part of the reason for the drop of HIV/AIDS in the white community is the willingness of folks to talk about the disease. Part of the reason is their willingness to fight for public and private dollars to serve the people who are infected in their community. With only a handful of African-American groups around the country willing to organize and to lobby for funds, we are woefully behind. The lion's share of funds for the education, prevention and treatment of this disease still go to the white community, despite the changing face of the disease.

We desperately need our African-American leaders to stand up and say enough is enough.

We desperately need our churches to be the places of healing and comfort and safety which God calls them to be. We desperately need our African-American organizations to start doing educational programs about this disease. We desperately need our politicians to join Congressman Louis Stokes and others who are pressing President Clinton to declare a public health emergency in the African-American community.

We can end the epidemic of HIV/AIDS in our community, but in order to do so we must end the silence.

Questions lingered about Starr prior to Zippergate

By Representative John Conyers, Jr.
Special to Sentinel-Voice

When we passed the Independent Counsel Act, my colleagues in Congress and I believed it would add credibility to investigations of high-ranking government officials by taking those important matters out of the hands of politically-appointed Attorneys General and putting them in the hands of impartially-chosen Independent Counsels.

Under the Act, if serious legal questions are raised about the behavior of the president or another high-level government official, the attorney general may ask a three-judge panel to pick an unbiased person to investigate those charges.

The members of Congress agreed that a neutral person should be selected to avoid any perception of bias either for or against the government official under investigation.

The story of Ken Starr's selection, however, raises questions about whether he is the kind of impartial person that we had in mind.

Before Starr was picked by the three-judge panel to investigate the president, the Attorney General, Janet Reno, had herself picked someone to fill that role — a highly regarded Republican prosecutor named Robert Fiske.

Even though Fiske had already begun his investigation, the three-judge panel replaced him because the judges felt he was tainted by having been selected by the Attorney General, who herself was a presidential appointee. The events surrounding the choice of Starr, however, suggest that the judges themselves may have had a partisan political agenda.

Less than a week before choosing Starr, Court of Appeals Judge David Sentelle, the Republican head of the three-judge panel, was seen having lunch with two Republican senators from North Carolina, both of whom are political enemies of the president.

When the lunch was reported in the press, the three men denied that they had discussed firing Fiske and hiring Starr. But the timing of that get-together must cause us to worry that the decision to dismiss Fiske and replace him with Starr was politically motivated.

Starr is a staunch Republican who served in both the Reagan and Bush Justice Departments. In fact, Starr has publicly stated that he would be happy to work in any future Republican administration.

While he was a lawyer in private practice, Starr considered representing a politically conservative women's group that opposed President Clinton in the lawsuit brought against him by Paula Jones.

These and other obvious conflicts of interest prompted the *New York Times* editorial board to call for him to step down as the independent counsel almost as soon as he was appointed.

Starr's partisan political background should have disqualified him from being chosen to investigate the President.

While initial concerns about his fairness might have quieted if Starr had taken extra care to conduct his investigation fairly, events have shown initial concerns about him to be justified.

John Conyers, Jr. is the longest-serving African-American in the history of the United States House of Representatives. He is the most senior Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee, the Committee of Congress to which any report by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr is likely to be referred. Conyers is also the Dean of the Congressional Black Caucus.

He was elected to the House of Representatives in 1964 and presently is serving his seventeenth term in Congress.

This is the first in an occasional series of articles by Conyers on a variety of topics, both political and otherwise.

Political playing field lacking in fairness, real competitiveness

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Among the two major campaign finance bills, eleven substitute bills and close to 600 amendments that will be debated in Congress this

summer are two bills initially conceived by political independents that have the potential to move real and substantial campaign finance reform beyond bipartisan gridlock.

The two reforms proposed by independents do not deal directly with campaign contributions or spending, but, if passed, would dramatically increase the fairness and competitiveness of federal elections.

These bills are the Voter Freedom Act, H.R. 2477, and the Debates Freedom Act, H.R. 2478, both introduced by Rep. Ron Paul, a Texas Republican and former presidential candidate of the Libertarian Party.

The Voter Freedom Act would streamline the process for third-party and independent candidates to gain access to the ballot in elections for president, U.S. senator and U.S. representative.

This bill is the latest version of the "Fair Elections Act," which was first introduced in 1985 by Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.) at the urging of a group of independent parties and candidates, including myself, who wanted to do something about the anti-competitive election laws in this country.

In an attempt to shield themselves from independent competition, Democrats and Republicans in state legislatures have passed discriminatory ballot access laws which require third-party candidates to collect 13 times more signatures than the Republican Party, and 28 times more than the Democratic Party.

This Way For Black Empowerment

By Dr. Lenora Fulani



In addition, many states use other devices to keep independents off the ballot: insufficient petitioning periods, unconstitu-

tional early petition filing deadlines, and limitations on eligibility to circulate and sign petitions.

The Voter Freedom Act would reduce the overall number of signatures required of independents to a reasonable maximum, end early filing deadlines, and allow candidates to have their name placed on the ballot with their party affiliation, if they so desire, without having to satisfy any additional requirements.

The Debates Freedom Act ensures that voters get to see all significant presidential candidates debate each other — not just the candidates that the major party bosses have decided are "significant," or that the media have decided are "newsworthy."

Under the provisions of this bill initially introduced by former Congressman Timothy Penny based on my exclusion from the 1988 presidential debates, candidates who received campaign financing from the Presidential Election Campaign Fund (i.e., public funding from our tax dollars) must agree not to participate in multi-candidate forums that exclude candidates with broad-based public support.

"Broad-based public support" is defined as having qualified for the ballot in at least 40 states, and being eligible for funds from the Presidential Election Campaign Fund.

Currently, the major party candidates' political handlers decide whether or not it would be advantageous for their candidate to debate an

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