

AIDS programs for Blacks, Latinos experiencing shortfalls

By Nisa Islam Muhammad

WASHINGTON (NNPA) — Sex is illegal in jail, so while prison authorities bury their heads in the sand and pretend it doesn't exist, America's penal institutions are "reservoirs for infection," according to presenters at the recent 2002 National Conference on African-Americans and AIDS.

"Eighty-three percent of prisoners in New York are Black and Latino. Seventy-three percent of them come from the seven neighborhoods with the highest HIV rates," explained Robert Fullilove III, associate dean of community and minority affairs at Columbia University.

Leading healthcare, government and community leaders called for a renewed focus on the rising HIV infection rate in the Black community.

They called for programs that enhance clinical care for Blacks with HIV/AIDS and increased awareness among clinicians, patients and caregivers about AIDS related issues.

"Prisons are amplification centers for HIV transmission.

These men don't identify themselves as homosexual or bisexual. They leave jail and go home to unsuspecting women," Fullilove said.

The issue is compounded, he argued, because the average American does not want to acknowledge the facts about sex and drug use.

Delegates attending the only conference in America focusing on the epidemic within this community also heard the rising rates of HIV/AIDS cases among Blacks.

The most recent figures available from federal Centers for Disease Control (CDC) show Blacks make up 38 percent of all total reported U.S. AIDS cases even though they represent just 13 percent of the population.

According to CDC statistics, in the year 2000, the last year for which full figures are available, there were 71,920 new HIV infections in Blacks, up from 64,299 in 1999, an increase of almost 12 percent. Blacks made up 48 percent of new AIDS cases in 2000, compared to 37 percent in 1999.

"The number of individuals living with HIV/AIDS in the African-American com-

munity continues to increase at alarming rates," said Scott Evertz, director of the White House Office on National AIDS Policy.

"We're dealing with a disease bounded by poverty and communities affected by poverty. We have to do things differently to combat this disease. We've done a good job in certain pockets but we're failing in others."

The numbers for HIV/AIDS have dropped significantly in the gay community after a massive infusion of government funds, and nationwide publicity coupled with education.

"There is disparity in the prevalence of this disease in the African-American and Latino communities as well as the amount of money flowing to these communities. We're going to make sure the dollars follow the epidemic and right now they don't," said Evertz.

"We're not beholden to certain groups like the Democrats were. We want to make sure the community organizations get the help they need. It's hard to argue with the statistics." Conference participants discussed other rea-

sons for the alarming increase in the Black community.

"African-Americans are less likely to have access to healthcare and therefore more likely to disengage themselves from the healthcare system," Fullilove said.

"Barriers must be eliminated regarding access to healthcare, testing, comprehensive education and prevention within the African-American population in order to close the gap in access to healthcare and the treatment of HIV/AIDS for those

who need it most."

For women, HIV/AIDS is wrecking havoc in the Black and Latino community. Seventy-seven percent of women infected belong to these populations. Heterosexual transmission accounts for 75 percent of female cases.

"Women think they can tell if a man is having sex with a man," said Dr. Celia Maxwell, director of the Women's Health Institute at Howard University, "but they can't and there are increasing numbers of men having sex

with men.

"D.C. has one of the highest rates of HIV infection in women, followed by New York, New Jersey and Florida. We're also seeing growing numbers of women over 50 getting HIV and they're predominantly Black. Another fast growing rate is HIV infection in 13-15 year olds."

All of the speakers agreed that intense education, access to services, additional research and more money are key to fighting this war.

Republicans

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publicans miss the point.

"With all due respect to the senator, affirmative action has never been quotas. In fact, the regulations are clear and the case law is clear that affirmative action abhors quotas," says Wilcher, former executive director of Americans for a Fair Chance, a non-partisan consortium of six civil rights organizations. "This is the kind of misinformation that is circulated by those who are not clearly, strongly in support of providing opportunities through affirmative action. The law is clear. Affirmative action has never been about quotas. It's always been about opportunity. To say anything other than that is to either not know the law or the

facts or to deliberately misrepresent it."

During the Clinton administration, Wilcher for seven years was deputy assistant secretary for the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs in the Employment Standards Administration of the U.S. Department of Labor. She says the overall Republican initiatives fall short of what Black America needs.

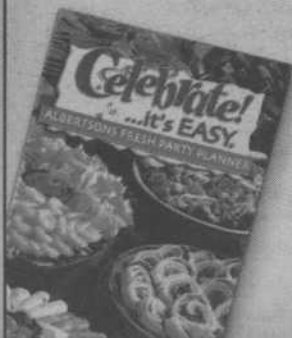
Wilcher says, "We welcome those initiatives, but they do not cover up, nor do they compensate for the administration's clearly oppositional and, I think, abhorrent positions on affirmative action, on judicial nominations and on other programs that harm us far more than these rather token kinds of gestures provide."



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