

Activists: Bush administration slow to react to AIDS crisis

By Makebra M. Anderson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (NNPA) — The Bush administration has found a weapon of mass destruction—AIDS. But, unlike what they thought were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the WMDs found in the United States aren't being actively pursued, AIDS activists charge.

"What needs to be done at this point in time is for Blacks to make HIV/AIDS a priority and begin that process in the voting booth this November," says Phill Wilson, executive director of the Black AIDS Institute in Los Angeles. "We need to ask ourselves which one of these candidates are going to be more concerned about stopping AIDS in our community."

The U.S. Census Bureau reports that African-Americans represent only 12 percent of the population, but account for 54 percent of all new AIDS cases. Significantly, Black women are more likely to get AIDS from heterosexual activity than White women. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), 67 percent of Black women are infected that way, compared to 59 percent of White women.

Of newly infected women in the U.S., approximately 64 percent are Black, 18 percent are White and 18 percent are Hispanic. Of newly-infected men, approximately 50 percent are Black, 30 percent are White and 20 percent are Hispanic. That means Black and Latino women contract 82 percent of all AIDS cases among women in the U.S. and Black and Latino men contract 70 percent of all AIDS cases among men in the U.S.

A surprising number of public officials appear unaware of these discrepancies.

The following exchange took place during vice presidential debates between moderator Gwen Ifill of "The NewsHour" and Vice President Dick Cheney.

IFILL: "...I want to talk to you about AIDS, and not about AIDS in China or Africa, but AIDS right here in this country, where Black women between the ages of 25 and 44 are 13 times more likely to die of the disease than their counterparts. What should the government's role be in helping to end the growth of this epidemic?"

CHENEY: "...I have not heard those numbers with respect to African-American women. I was not aware that

it was — that they're in epidemic there..."

Some say a lack of knowledge by administration officials is one reason why more progress has not been made in combating the AIDS pandemic.

"They [the Bush administration] were slow to respond to the epidemic and therefore, it has got a hold of us," says Wilson, the AIDS activist. "Epidemics are difficult to control once they have taken hold and the only way to stop an epidemic is to get in front of it. As a result, HIV/AIDS has become a cycle that Blacks and those in Sub-Sahara Africa can't get out of."

Former president Bill Clinton was also accused of neglecting HIV/AIDS. But according to the Office of National AIDS policy, during the Clinton administration, funding for AIDS research increased by 57 percent, funding for HIV prevention increased 36 percent and funding for the Ryan White CARE Act increased by 260 percent.

According to the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), one of the main advocacy groups calling for global action to curb AIDS, Sub-Sahara Africa had only 11 percent of the world's population in 2003, but almost two-thirds (25 million) of the 40 million people living with HIV.

It's a problem too large to ignore.

In his January 2003 State of the Union address, the president announced the Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, a 5-year initiative to provide treatment to 2 million people by 2008. Now, almost two years later, the Bush administration has completed less than 1.5 percent of its goal. If it continues at the present rate of 25,000 people per year, the administration will miss its target of servicing 2 million by 2008 by 1.9 million people.

Dr. Mark Dybul, assistant U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator and Chief Medical Officer in the State Department's Office of the Global AIDS Coordinator, remains confident that the administration will meet its objective.

"In July, August and September we opened many new sites in Africa," explains Dybul. "It's a matter of continuing to build and expand. First you reach 25,000 then 75,000, then 100,000 and then 200,000. We're continuing to

build as we speak."

The U.S. is the largest donor to the Global Fund, a partnership between governments, the private sector and affected communities to finance international health. Since its inception in January 2002, the Global fund has acted quickly to disperse funds to help save lives. The fund reports that it has distributed \$511 million in grants to countries devastated by AIDS, including Ghana, Rwanda, Zambia and the Philippines.

Some say it could be doing more.

"The Global Fund has already felt the effects of the Bush administration trying to cut funding. At the current rate, the Global Fund will not be able to initiate new grants until 2007," says David Bryden, communications director of Global AIDS Alliance, a grassroots organization working closely with other organizations to end the AIDS epidemic.

"Last year, the president requested \$547 million for

the Global Fund, but this year he only requested \$200 million.

"The U.S. is giving more than the rest of the world combined in global funding — giving one-third of the fund's budget," says Dybul. "The president has only requested \$200 million this year because he feels we can move money very quickly through our own bilateral products. The Global Fund is just one component."

What he calls bilateral products also include the re-

authorization of the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency (CARE) Act, which provides federal funds for life-extending care, among other things.

"We say to the rest of the world, 'Where are you?'" asks Dybul. "We can't even give as much as Congress has allocated because legally we can't give more than one-third of the fund's budget."

That explanation still does not satisfy critics.

"Just as he [President
(See AIDS, Page 15)



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