

PRESIDENTIAL
ADVISORY
COUNCIL ON
HIV/AIDS

March 16, 1998

The Honorable Donna Shalala
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Shalala:

As the leading public health official in the country, it is your responsibility to exercise leadership on critical issues affecting the health of the nation. As the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS, we urge you to demonstrate that leadership on the issue of needle exchange programs in our common fight against the transmission of HIV.

As you know, the statistics are compelling – injection drug use is directly responsible for half of all new HIV infections in this country annually, and indirectly responsible for the infection of thousands more people who are the sexual partners or children of infected users. HIV transmission related to needle sharing is, to a great extent, responsible for the frightening and disproportionate spread of HIV among African-Americans and Latinos, particularly women.

As you also know, the scientific evidence of the efficacy of needle exchange programs in preventing new infections is equally compelling, and there is no credible evidence that needle exchange programs lead to increased drug use.

We are, therefore, increasingly dismayed by your almost complete silence and continued inaction. This critical health issue demands your leadership, not only inside the government but also on a public level. Needle exchange programs have powerful and vocal opponents. As the nation's leading spokesperson on health you must insure that science, not unsubstantiated fears, guides this administration's policies.

It is imperative that you state, publicly and unequivocally, what the scientific evidence demonstrated: needle exchange programs meet the two-pronged tests laid out in the law. By issuing such a determination you will send an important message to the American people, and will help to change the terms of debate and discussion on this issue.

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It is equally imperative that you immediately engage the President on this matter, by providing him with a full briefing on the scientific data and stressing the critical role needle exchange programs can play in reaching his stated goal of reducing the number of new HIV infections until there are none. We are hopeful that, presented with such compelling evidence and your strong advocacy, the President will immediately act in the interest of public health and bring federal policy into line with current scientific knowledge.

Lack of political will can no longer justify ignoring the science. Every day that goes by means more needless new infections and more human suffering. We call upon you to make an immediate determination and to allow the local use of federal funds for needle exchange programs as part of comprehensive HIV prevention program. To do anything less would be an abdication of your responsibilities.

Sincerely yours,

[original signed on March 16, 1998]

R. Scott Hitt, M.D.

Chair

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