

PRESIDENTIAL

March 17, 1998

ADVISORY

COUNCIL ON

HIV/AIDS

The Honorable William Jefferson Clinton
President
The White House

Dear Mr. President,

When you told us at the White House Conference on HIV/AIDS in 1995 that you wanted to see our country “reduce the number of new infections each and every year until there are no more new infections,” we believed you. Thus, it is with great frustration and disappointment that we, the members of your Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS, find it necessary to write this letter to you. We must express, in the strongest terms possible, our profound dismay regarding the lack of progress on the critical issue of removing the prohibition on the use of federal funds for comprehensive needle exchange programs.

Despite years of study and an overwhelming preponderance of scientific evidence, no action has been forthcoming. All six federally funded reports, an NIH Consensus Conference report, and many other reputable studies have concluded that needle exchange programs reduce HIV transmission and do not encourage drug use. In light of this overwhelming evidence--as well as support for needle exchange programs by the American Medical Association, the American Public Health Association and numerous other public health organizations across the country--the continuing delay by Secretary Shalala is appalling.

Tragically, we must conclude that it is a lack of political will, not scientific evidence that is creating this failure to act. This political treatment of a public health issue is killing people; and it must cease.

According to studies from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, half of the 40,000 annual new HIV infections in this country are transmitted through needle sharing. Thousands more are infected through sexual contact with needle users. Injection drug use also accounts for the overwhelming majority of the pediatric AIDS cases in this country.

That the populations hurt most by your Administration’s continued silence are largely poor African-Americans and Latinos is particularly shameful in light of your Race Initiative’s stated goal of ending health disparities among racial and ethnic groups. We as a nation will never succeed in this goal without your bold leadership and political courage.

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It will be impossible to bring the epidemic to an end until you take decisive and effective action on this issue. Access to uncontaminated injection equipment, in conjunction with outreach, education, and referral and access to effective substance abuse treatment, is essential.

Additionally, we have yet to see any other coherent strategies or initiatives by the Administration to deal with the rampaging HIV epidemic among injection drug users, their partners and their children. We are left with the unfortunate conclusion that their lives are considered to be expendable by those with decision-making power within this Administration.

Without action on this important matter, it is increasingly difficult to believe that your Administration is truly committed to ending new infections. As your advisors, we must tell you that this goal cannot be reached without action on this important item.

Mr. President, where do you stand on this issue?

We must further tell you that failure to act on this matter is destroying this Administration's credibility with people concerned about AIDS and is overshadowing the many other positive steps that have been made in combating this epidemic.

When the history of the AIDS epidemic is finally written, we do not want your legacy to be one of having failed to take a necessary step at a critical time to save thousands of lives.

We know that this issue is viewed by many as controversial. It is your leadership obligation to hear the varying viewpoints, weigh the scientific evidence, and make a Presidential decision on the matter. We fully believe that careful and honest consideration of the case on the merits can lead to only one conclusion: needle exchange programs decrease the transmission of HIV without encouraging drug use and, as such, are one important part of a continuum of activities to combat HIV.

Secretary Shalala must issue an immediate determination that needle exchange programs meet the two-pronged test laid out in the law and must remove the restriction on the use of federal funds where desired by state and local officials.

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In the nearly three years of the Council's existence, we have issued numerous recommendations and letters on this issue, and there is tremendous impatience and anger in the community and among Council members that nothing has happened. Every day that passes without action can be measured in needless new infections, infections we know how to prevent. The time for study and unwarranted delay is over. We urgently implore you and Secretary Shalala to act immediately.

Sincerely,

[original signed on March 17, 1998]

R. Scott Hitt, M.D.
Chair

Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS Members:

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Terje Anderson
Regina Aragon, M.P.P.
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