

PRESIDENTIAL

ADVISORY September 16, 1998

COUNCIL ON  
HIV/AIDS The Honorable William Jefferson Clinton  
President  
The White House

Dear Mr. President:

As your Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS, we must again convey the profound disappointment, frustration and anger we feel about the course of action your Administration chose to take relative to needle exchange funding.

The belated willingness to certify the scientific fact that needle exchange programs help reduce HIV infection without increasing drug use was an important step forward. However, the accompanying refusal to allow states and localities to use federal funds to support this successful intervention represents the triumph of political expediency over scientific evidence and compelling human need. Your stated commitment to ending new HIV infections is seriously called into question by this decision.

This issue is not resolved -- injection drug use continues to drive the HIV epidemic in our country, taking a particularly heavy toll in African-American and Latino communities. Your decision on this matter simply accentuates the failure of your Administration (and the country as a whole) to take effective action to stem the twin epidemics of HIV and drug use in our country.

We continue to believe strongly that allowing federal funds to be used for needle exchange programs is one vital part of an effective response to the spread of HIV among drug users. Absent such action, your Administration must be willing to take other significant and bold steps to meet this public health challenge, including:

- Ensuring that all Administration officials who speak publicly about needle exchange send a single message consistent with the findings of Secretary Shalala that needle exchange programs decrease HIV infections without increasing substance abuse.
- Enhancing programs to provide education, counseling, support and health services to drug users who are not in treatment. This includes an increased financial commitment to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's HIV prevention programs. The failure to seek adequate budget increases for these prevention programs seriously undermines your stated commitment to HIV prevention.

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- Significantly expanding substance abuse treatment services funded through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration block grant. In this regard, it is not enough to simply talk about drug treatment without taking significant steps to increase and improve drug treatment capacity. The Administration must set and then meet the goal of providing treatment on demand for every drug user seeking such treatment.
- Better coordinating the diverse federal efforts to prevent HIV infection among drug users and their sexual partners. During the White House Summit on HIV/AIDS in December of 1995, you called for a national meeting of public health and substance abuse providers to address this issue. An August 1997 meeting was held in Tampa, but since that time, no significant action has taken place on this matter. We urge you to instruct the leaders of the pertinent federal agencies to implement the recommendations that came out of that meeting.
- Modification of the Model Drug Paraphernalia Act to reflect the public health evidence demonstrating that allowing possession of small numbers of syringes significantly reduces needle sharing. The Council continues to urge meaningful action on this recommendation, which was made over three years ago.
- The Council recommends that you instruct officials at the relevant federal agencies to consult with advocates, needle exchange and other HIV service providers in order to identify and implement meaningful efforts to advance scientific knowledge and increase public understanding of needle exchange programs. In order to be most effective, such efforts must respond to the self-identified needs of local communities.
- It is possible that the Congress will propose a permanent ban on needle exchange funding during the final weeks of the 1998 session. We strongly urge you to veto any such legislation in order to maintain flexibility in decision making should your Administration or a future Administration recognize the necessity of allowing the use of federal funds for this purpose. In addition, we specifically call your attention to legislative efforts to prevent the District of Columbia from using local, federal or private funds for needle exchange programs, and urge your veto of any legislation which usurps local authority on this matter.
- Finally, we must remind you that your decision to prevent the use of federal funds for local needle exchange will result in many unnecessary new HIV infections. In response, we urge you to allocate sufficient resources to meet the medical and social service needs of those who become infected. Future budget levels for the Ryan White CARE Act, Housing Opportunities for People with AIDS, Medicaid and other programs that serve people living with HIV/AIDS must take into account these new infections.

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As your advisors on HIV/AIDS, we must urge you to seriously and effectively address the continuing crisis of HIV/AIDS among injection drug users and their sexual partners. In light of your previous decision on needle exchange, immediate action on the items outlined above is even more imperative.

Sincerely,

(Original signed by RSH, 9/16/98)

R. Scott Hitt, M.D.

Chair

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