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# AIDS bills languish in NC legislature

by David Jones  
Q-Notes Staff

RALEIGH—Two bills followed by AIDS activists in NC are struggling to stay alive mid-way through the legislative session.

Rep. Thomas Wright (D-Wilmington) introduced both bills. One, titled Needle Exchange Pilot Program, would authorize the state to approve up to four pilot programs in local communities to exchange used needles for clean ones by injecting drug users. Similar programs in other states have demonstrated that they reduce the spread of infectious diseases such as HIV and help outreach workers get drug users into drug treatment programs.

The bill cleared a Senate committee by a 7 to 1 vote and was referred to the full Senate. However, it was sent back to committee without a vote, where the bill died. There were unconfirmed reports that senior Democratic party officials ordered the bill sent back to committee because they feared that Republicans would use it against Democrats in the next election. The companion bill has never been voted on in the House committee where it still sits. After weeks of pressure by activists to get the Republican co-chairs of the House Committee on Human Resources to even agree to let the bill be debated, it was finally heard on April 29. After a long discussion, which indicated that the bill was likely to get the committee's approval, a motion was made to approve it by Rep. Alma Adams (D-Greensboro), but the committee co-chair, Rep. Julia Howard (R-Mocksville), adjourned the meeting without allowing a vote.

The needle exchange bill could possibly still be considered if its sponsor can now attach an appropriations to it to provide some money for some aspect of the pilot programs (policy bills have to clear either the House or the Senate by May 1 to stay alive, but appropriations bills do not). So far, the House committee co-chairs have not agreed to let the bill be discussed further so that a motion can be made to attach an appropriations to it.

AIDS Prevention Funds is the name of the other AIDS-related bill introduced by Rep. Wright. It would appropriate \$2 million for community-based prevention programs and services by local health departments. The bill was referred to a joint Senate-House appropriations subcommittee, where it sits, unheard and undebated. The Senate has adopted a budget, but the House has not. The Senate budget does not include the AIDS prevention money. The House is expected to adopt its version of a state budget by the end of May. Activists are pressuring House members to demand a vote on the bill in committee so that it can get to the House floor for a vote within the next two weeks.

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the first AIDS prevention bill's introduction in the NC General Assembly. The first was introduced in 1987 by former Rep. Howard Barnhill (D-Charlotte). Some form of AIDS prevention bill has been introduced each year since. None of the bills has ever been funded. ▼

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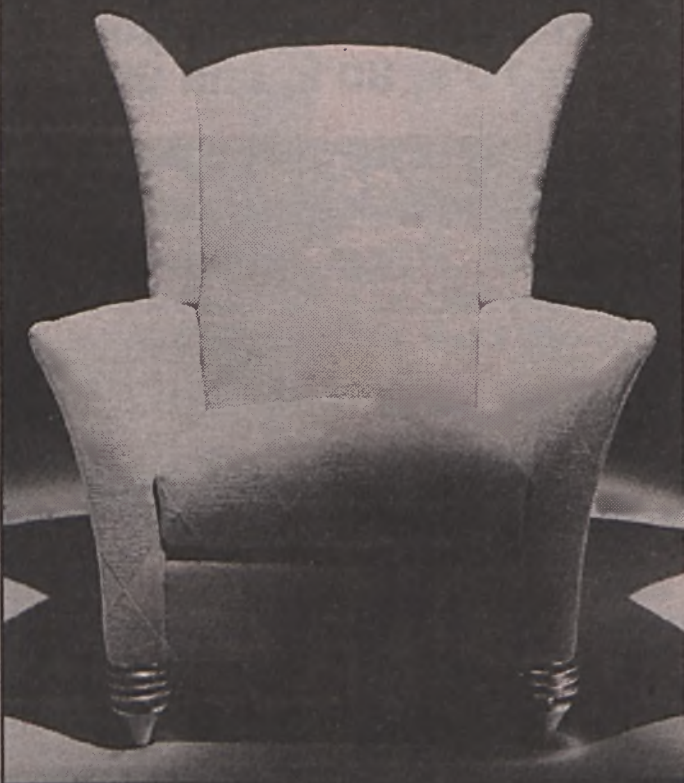
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