

# AIDS report cards issued to coincide with World AIDS Day

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Special to Q-Notes

NEW YORK—Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, the nation's oldest gay legal services organization, and AIDS Action, the nation's largest grassroots AIDS advocacy agency, released their annual World AIDS Day report cards, grading key individuals, organizations and government agencies on AIDS-related treatment, prevention and policy efforts.

"World AIDS Day is a time to reflect not only on our losses but also on what we are doing for our futures. For a third year in a row, with grades of "A+" to "F," Lambda is evaluating responses to this epidemic," Lambda Executive Director Kevin M. Cathcart said.

Lambda's third annual report card highlights questions about the future congressional impact on the epidemic, given the mixed past performance by incoming House Speaker Robert Livingston. As a powerful head of the appropriations committee, the Louisiana Republican helped enact important new AIDS funding, but sided with party extremists in votes affecting federal AIDS-related policy.

The year's biggest failure, according to Lambda, was Clinton Administration Drug Czar Barry McCaffrey, dubbed the "Dunce of 1998."

McCaffrey flunked for the second year in a

row for his uninformed meddling in AIDS policy. This year, he received an "F" for his role in securing a federal funding ban on programs that provide drug users with clean syringes, which have been scientifically shown to reduce the spread of HIV.

Last year, McCaffrey flunked for promoting bans on medical use of marijuana.

Said Lambda AIDS Project Director Catherine Hanssens, "Under McCaffrey's leadership, the war on drugs has become a war on people with HIV and AIDS. By ignoring realities of prevention and treatment, he fuels the pain of this epidemic."

Another influential leader with a near failing grade is Robert Livingston (R-LA) the Speaker-elect of the US House in the 106th Congress. He received a "D" as an overall rating, failing on prevention issues, receiving a "C" on treatment issues and a "D" on policy issues. Capitol Hill watchers say there are two Bob Livingstons: the party loyalist with a dismal voting record on reproductive rights, gay and AIDS issues, and the open-minded legislator willing to reject extremist and destructive federal bills.

A failure receiving special mention was New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani who suddenly and without scientific support this year denounced methadone treatment as unneces-

sary for people addicted to heroin. Giuliani got his "F" for "bullying a vulnerable city population when he should be working to reduce risks for HIV infection."

Others receiving failing grades include bookseller Barnes and Noble for removing a special *POZ* magazine issue about youth and HIV containing a packet of condoms. Also failing was insurance giant Mutual of Omaha for drastically limiting coverage on health policies sold to people with HIV.

The Lambda report card gave special commendation to a New York City-based volunteer group known as YELL, or the Youth Education Lifeline. YELL received an "A+" for its dogged advocacy of comprehensive safer-sex education in New York City public schools.

Also receiving straight "A"s were Gregory Smith, an HIV-positive inmate; Jane Fowler, head of the National Association on HIV over Fifty; Dr. C. Everett Koop, former US Surgeon General; Jeffrey Birnbaum, a healthcare provider working primarily with inner-city youth; Diane McCague, a needle-exchange activist who distributes clean syringes despite repeated arrests; and the Congressional Black Caucus of the US House which, this year, came to grips with the reality that the HIV epidemic is now ravaging communities of color and low income neighborhoods.

An "A-" went to the US Supreme Court for its landmark decision in *Bragdon v. Abbott* which established that HIV can be a disability covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) from the moment of infection. Although stopping short of automatically extending the ADA to all people with HIV, the powerful decision sent a strong and decisive signal that discrimination on the basis of HIV status is illegal. Two other decisions — that the ADA applies to prisons and that union members cannot be forced to arbitrate, rather than sue, to resolve their ADA claims — fuel hope that the Court is on the right track with the ADA.

Notably, this year's report card found increased AIDS-phobia across the country. Gregory Herek, a University of California at Davis researcher, measured the damage caused by public officials' misguided messages and poor education policies about AIDS.

Herek received a top grade for his study which found that, more than ever, the general public harbors irrational fears about people with AIDS and is widely confused about how to avoid infection.

"Herek's study is a telling symptom of the large scale failure of state and national public health officials to deal in a meaningful way with HIV prevention," Hanssens said. "Almost 20 years into the epidemic, they continue to be guided or intimidated into silence by the politicization of the disease by right-wing extremists," she added.

Cathcart said, "Even with declining death rates, this epidemic continues to claim the lives of our loved ones. Our leaders must marshal the necessary courage to support real sex education and syringe exchange programs that will make a difference in the fight against AIDS."

## Federal findings

AIDS Action's report card on the federal government's response to the AIDS epidemic offered grades in four areas: research ("A-"), care and treatment ("B"), prevention and education ("D") and international efforts ("F").

The grades were agreed to by a panel of AIDS experts and advocates including Dr. Joycelyn Elders, former US Surgeon General; Mary Fisher, AIDS advocate and a person living with HIV; Steve Gunderson, former Congressman (R-WI); Kate Shindle, Miss America 1998 and AIDS Action Pedro Zamora Fellow; Tavis Smiley, host of *BET Tonight* on Black Entertainment Television; Jeanne White, founder and president of the Ryan White Foundation; Charles E. Young, UCLA Chancellor Emeritus; and Daniel Zingale, AIDS Action executive director.

"Twenty years into the epidemic, America's record on AIDS remains uneven," said Zingale. "As America reaps the rewards of our investments in research and care, we're witnessing skyrocketing infection rates and an AIDS holocaust in Africa because of our failure to address prevention and international efforts."

While new AIDS drugs are prolonging the lives of thousands of HIV-positive Americans, their high cost make them virtually unavailable to most AIDS-ravaged, underdeveloped nations which now comprise 90 percent of the world's HIV-positive populations. Even worse, our government has failed to support emergency drug assistance and HIV prevention worldwide.

At a time of increasing HIV infection rates, the federal government has flat-funded domestic prevention and has failed to launch new initiatives around HIV prevention and education. Young people now comprise half of the estimated 40,000 new US HIV infections every year.

Mary Fisher provided the only dissent on the panel, disagreeing with the research grade because of her concern about the government's failure to adequately address women's health. HIV is the third leading cause of death among women age 25 to 44.

"Because we fell for the myth that AIDS is a white, gay man's disease, we never prepared for what we now face," said Fisher. "As a result, we're desperate for research, for prevention, for access to care and for effective drug protocols for women."

Despite emergency care and treatment through the AIDS Drug Assistance Program, Congress has failed to modernize current federal policy that denies low-income HIV-positive Americans access to Medicaid and AIDS-preventing drugs until they develop full-blown AIDS. ▼

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