

FORUM

I can't take another transfer



Nigel Alston
Motivational Moments

"Energy must amass over time before perceivable change occurs."
- A principle of physics

I was standing in the need of prayer - for more patience - after a recent customer service call to my wireless phone carrier. I noticed something had changed when I could no longer access the "net" using my digital phone or log in on the Internet site to make changes. I tried repeatedly to connect to the online Web site and was

informed that several customers had the same (my) user name and password. I was also informed that the mobile phone number I entered (mine) was in use too. How could that be?

My call for customer service was prompted by my latest statement, just received in the mail, charging me for the service again. The last thing I wanted when I dialed the customer service toll-free number was the menu of voice mail options I had to navigate to get service.

That's frustrating when you want service, now! I wanted what every customer who has a problem and needs assistance wants: a real, live person, right then, who could help ME. That was an unrealistic expectation that doomed me from the start; my patience would be

hijacked.

In addition to my user name, password and mobile number being in use, I was informed that they had no record I had the service. How could that be? I pay for the mobile web service monthly and my statement documents I was charged for it again this month.

I decided to call for prompt attention, a promise written on the statement, by the customer care department. I dialed the toll-free number and was greeted by a programmed voice offering this advice: "Please listen carefully. The menu has changed."

I entered my cell phone number and five-digit zip code as instructed and listened to another series of voice mail options, including press "*" to listen to this menu again. I

pressed "0" and was informed that the next available associate would be with me in a moment. After waiting for what seemed like forever - a few minutes is a long time in our microwave society - I was connected to a friendly voice, the first of FIVE people I would talk to this night.

After navigating through the menu of options and waiting for a "live" person to assist me who couldn't help, I was transferred to a technical assistance person. He didn't have the answer either it turned out and assured me that the billing area had all the information needed to assist me. It amazed me that each person had more confidence than I did that the next person could help me.

See Alston on A11

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A Conversation About Race Relations

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AIDS devastating Urban America



Armstrong Williams
Guest Columnist

"I don't think there is any question that the (AIDS) epidemic in this country is becoming increasingly an epidemic of color."
- U.S. Surgeon General Dr. David Satcher

Despite efforts to bombard the public with safe sex messages over the past two decades, the HIV virus continues to spread through the urban community at an alarming rate.

Some of the chilling statistics recently disclosed by researchers: Urban dwellers account for nearly two-thirds of all new HIV infections in America, with that rate jumping to 67 percent among urban dwellers between the ages of 13 and 24.

Let us dwell for a moment on two facts: The AIDS virus is 100 percent fatal.

Currently, more than two-thirds of young urban dwellers will die from this disease. The implications are disastrous not just for the infected, but for throngs of orphans this scourge threatens to leave in its wake. It is here - with the surviving children - that the disease may have its greatest impact.

As the rate of infections and birth rate continues to rise in urban America, an increasing number of children will lose at least one parent to this disease. This influx of orphans will sew child-welfare problems into the social structure of urban America for decades to come. To understand what this means in terms of our children's future, consider the small world of hope that children inhabit. Now imagine this child trying to reconcile himself to the overwhelming emptiness of death. This is the reality facing countless urban children over the next decade. Just as they are beginning to truly discover their world, they will be forced to watch their parents die. Many will have to drop out of school in order to support

themselves.

It is hard to gauge the internal numbness of children who must confront death. Couple this trauma with the absence of an emotionally secure environment and a decent education, and one begins to see how this disease threatens to bind and suffocate even the survivors. Once deprived of economic security, education and a parent's unconditional love, a means of stemming the disease might follow. For, without education, there will be little enlightenment, and even less understanding of how to make the problem better.

Already, health issues fall by the wayside of the more immediate concerns of drug abuse and arbitrary violence in urban America. With the rising rate of HIV infections, an entire generation of urban dwellers will be forced to confront these issues at an earlier age. Plainly, it will be difficult for this generation of orphans to be introspective about their health, when they are struggling simply to feed themselves each day.

And so the cycle threatens to

continue, endlessly and senselessly.

The reluctance of urban dwellers to adequately address this issue may be linked to the fact that early educational efforts regarding HIV targeted specific high risk groups - like intravenous drug users and homosexual men - that are particularly taboo in the urban community. Whereas suburbanites have tended to be particularly vocal about the disease, HIV continues to be spoken of in whispers and shame in the urban community. Consequently, people already infected with the disease are hesitant to seek medical care amid a community that regards HIV with equal doses of fear and rejection.

Researchers and advocates often point to his brutal societal stigma as a main contributor to the alarming rate of new AIDS cases among urbanites. Too afraid and ashamed to deal with the realities of HIV, many urban dwellers continue to engage in risky sexual behavior, and to invite disaster.

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Race, drugs, politics and big money



Earl Ofari Hutchinson
Guest Columnist

In November, former President Clinton told Rolling Stone Magazine that drug sentences in many cases are too long and that the policy needs to be re-examined. Clinton's words seemed to be the long hoped for official signal that the drug laws desperately need overhaul. Clinton's bit of public enlightenment ignited a frantic stampede by drug reform groups to submit the names of hundreds of petty drug dealers serving long stretches in federal prisons under the crushing minimum mandatory drug sentences. The sentences were set in granite by Congress a decade ago and judges have no say-so in them.

Clinton denied nearly all the requests for clemency. One of the few he didn't deny was the request to release Carlos Vignali. According to federal prosecutors and police investigators, Vignali was the kingpin in a lucrative drug ring that shipped hundreds of pounds of cocaine from L.A. to Minnesota.

Vignali got a 15-year sentence. But it was more than luck or Clinton compassion that released Vignali after he served six years. His rich daddy, Horacio, dumped tens of thousands of dollars into the cam-

paign coffers of some of California's top politicians. Two top Democrats, the former speaker of the California assembly, Antonio Villaraigosa, and U.S. Congressman Xavier Becerra, are leading contenders in Los Angeles' upcoming mayoral election.

Both wrote letters and made phone calls asking the White House to consider clemency for Vignali. Their actions cast an ugly glare on two troubling problems. One is the corrosive influence of money in politics. The other is the horribly racially-warped and deeply flawed drug war.

The obvious question is: Do wealthy political donors routinely expect to get favors for their money? They do. And when they get them it confirms public belief that politics is hopelessly soiled by big money, and that politicians can be bought and sold. This enrages voters, and drives millions from the polls in disgust. It also fuels public demand for real campaign financing reform to eliminate damaging abuses and influence of big money in politics.

But with the exception of a handful of flawed ballot propositions in California to limit campaign contributions, a bill by Arizona Sen. John McCain to eradicate soft money contributions, and an anemic reform law by California legislators, politicians duck for cover, or figure out ways to water down campaign reform every time.

And this points to the second troubling problem raised by Vignali's release.

He was not a poor, black or Latino petty drug dealer. According to federal prosecutors and police investigators, he owned a pricey condo in an upscale L.A. neighborhood, and unloaded thousands at the gambling tables in Las Vegas. He was the center of a lucrative Minnesota to L.A. cocaine drug ring.

Was this the type of drug dealer that Clinton had in mind when he lambasted the draconian drug sentences. If so, Clinton should know better. According to reports by the Justice Department, and the U.S. Sentencing Commission:

- The overwhelming majority of those prosecuted in federal courts for drug possession and sale (mostly small amounts of crack cocaine) and given stiff mandatory sentences of 10 years to life are blacks and Latinos.
- Only a small percent of those sentenced to jail terms are major dealers.
- There is a massive and deep disparity in how blacks (crack cocaine) and whites (powdered cocaine) are being sentenced by federal and state courts.

Currently more than 2 million inmates pack America's jails. One million of them are black. A growing number of them were convicted of mostly non-violent drug crimes. They received stiff sentences under the federal minimum mandatory drug sentencing laws. Clinton's drug czar, Barry McCaffrey, who mightily

defended the administration's policy, in the last year of his tenure shifted gears and branded the drug policy a bad policy and bad law enforcement.

Clinton and former Attorney General Janet Reno initially backed these laws.

But under fierce pressure from black leaders and civil liberties groups they gave tepid and much belated support to amending the laws to eliminate the gaping racial disparities. Congress refused to budge and Clinton did not push the issue when he had the chance.

According to federal prosecutors there were 30 co-defendants in Vignali's drug ring. Many of them were poor, black, and much lower on the scale than he was. They were convicted and got maximum sentences under the federal minimum mandatory drug law. There is little chance any of them will get top politicians to send letters and make phone calls to the White House on their behalf.

Clinton is being pressed to explain the suspect pardon of convicted tax evader and commodities broker Marc Rich. California's top politicians should also be pressed to tell why they lobbied so hard for Vignali's release, and whether they would do the same for those who don't contribute big money to their campaigns.

Earl Ofari Hutchinson is the president of the National Alliance for Positive Action. Web site: www.natalliance.org and email: ehutchinson@natalliance.org



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