

Obama Unveils National AIDS Strategy Amid Praise and Criticism

Dan Robinson | White House July 13, 2010

President Barack Obama on Tuesday unveiled what he calls a comprehensive national strategy to fight HIV/AIDS. Critics assert that the plan falls far short of what is needed, while others call it an important step toward a more coordinated and effective national response to AIDS.

The plan aims to reduce infections by 25 percent within five years, expand education about the disease, and increase the number of infected people who are aware of their HIV-positive status.

Addressing some 250 AIDS activists and community leaders at a White House reception, the president said the new strategy comes nearly 30 years after the medical community first documented some of the first cases of AIDS.

It will work, he said, in a comprehensive and coordinated way to improve therapy for those with

HIV, expand testing, and narrow health disparities by ensuring that treatment is available in disadvantaged communities.

The question, the president said, is whether the nation will fulfill its obligations, and devote the resources and political will to confront what he called a preventable tragedy.

"While HIV transmission rates in this country are not as high as they once were, every new case is one case too many," said President Obama. "We are here because we believe in an America where those living with HIV/AIDS are not viewed with suspicion but are treated with respect. Where they are provided the medications and health care that they need. Where they can live out their lives as fully as their health allows."

Earlier, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius said the strategy recognizes that while there has been progress in turning the tide against HIV/AIDS, more needs to be done.

"Since the late-1990s, our progress in preventing new infections has slowed," said Kathleen Sebelius. "Annual infections have held steady in the mid-50,000 a year. And because the number of people living with HIV has gone up over those years, that means we are driving down infection

rates slightly, but not fast enough. We're keeping pace when we should be gaining ground."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than one million people in the United States have HIV, with more than 56,000 people becoming infected each year. Eighteen-thousand people die of the disease annually.

Jeffrey Crowley, Director of the White House Office of National HIV/AIDS Policy, says the strategy is a road map that attempts to do three things.

"We need to intensify our prevention efforts in communities where HIV is most heavily concentrated," said Jeffrey Crowley. "We need to expand targeted efforts to prevent HIV infection, using a combination of effective evidence-based approaches. And we need to educate all Americans about the threat of HIV and how to prevent it."

Even as the new strategy was rolled out, it faced criticism from critics within the AIDS community who say the president is under-funding the effort.

Michael Weinstein is president of the AIDS Healthcare Foundation.

"Access to care for HIV is declining in this country," said Michael Weinstein. "You can't say this is a new strategy, if you don't intend to spend any money on it."

President Obama said he recognizes that some U.S. states have cut back on funding for the AIDS Drug Assistance Program, which helps individuals gain access to medication. He said his administration has worked to increase government assistance.

Mitchell Warren of Global Advocacy for AIDS Prevention says although the United States has provided critical leadership in fighting AIDS globally, there has not been enough coordination of efforts at home.

The White House plan, he says, provides leadership and lays out a strategy for the first time in 30 years.

"It does provide the basis for a solid program going forward," said Mitchell Warren. "It's an important strategy. And I think most importantly, unlike many other strategies, it actually lays out an implementation plan that includes milestones, targets. It's a thoughtful strategy."

President Obama said the national AIDS effort


must be pursued with the global health strategy to roll back the pandemic beyond U.S. borders.

Some AIDS groups, including the AIDS Healthcare Foundation and the Global AIDS Alliance, say President Barack Obama has not maintained the global U.S. commitment to fighting AIDS, including sufficient funding for the \$15-billion President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR, program.

The administration rejects that assertion, noting that President Obama has pledged to maintain U.S. leadership in the fight against AIDS. Officials point to increases in PEPFAR funding, amid difficult economic times, along with contributions of \$63 billion over six years to the Global Health Initiative.

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