Why I Interrupted President Obama's Speech on the National HIV/AIDS Strategy

By Charles King

August 4, 2010

On July 13, I interrupted President Obama's speech at a reception marking the release of his National HIV/AIDS Strategy. While I only got out two words -- the now-infamous "Mr. President!" -- I backed off when the president promised to speak with me after his speech.

Since, I've received a lot of criticism. On my organization's Web site and in the blogosphere, many have called me disrespectful and overly brash, citing the interruption as counterproductive. I'd like to explain why I believe it was necessary to take such a bold action at such a formal event.

President Obama's plan fails to identify HIV/AIDS in the U.S. as the emergency that it is -- and if we want him to do so, we've got to take him to task. There is a catastrophic AIDS epidemic in Obama's own backyard. Seven percent of black men in Washington, D.C. have HIV. Seven percent. In Haiti, the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, 2.2 percent of the population is positive. Yet even close proximity to the epidemic has not been enough to wake President Obama to the urgent reality we face as a nation.

Today, Housing Works released a policy document explaining what's wrong with the president's plan and how we would like to see it revised. It's easy to sum up the plan's most egregious defects. Thirty years into the AIDS crisis, President Obama's long-awaited strategy aims to cut new HIV infections by a mere 25 percent -- in a leisurely five years. It offers no solution for the 2,359 Americans on AIDS Drug Assistance Program wait lists. It minimizes housing as an important component of care and completely ignores the role of homelessness in HIV transmission. It offers little in new funding to carry out its goals.

This Is a Strategy to Manage the Epidemic, Not End It
Yet almost all of the nation's major AIDS organizations embraced the plan with enthusiasm. Indeed, the audience at the White House that day laughed approvingly at another interruption: the man who shouted, "We love you!" when President Obama began to speak.

We cannot allow affection for President Obama (and gratitude that he is not President Bush) to subdue us into acceptance of the status quo. Even if the president's plan succeeds, more than a quarter million Americans will have been infected with HIV in the next five years. In 2015 alone, we will still have more than 42,000 new HIV infections.

Assuming that the administration's goals remain constant (reducing infections by 25 percent every five years), we won't reach 10,000 new infections per year until 2040. We won't get near 5,000 new infections until 2055.

We have effective HIV treatment and prevention methods. It is disgraceful that we are expected to endorse the pace of a plan that will take more than half a century to realize its vision of a nation where "HIV infections are rare."

Is this truly the best we can expect? In his first major speech about the Gulf Coast oil disaster, President Obama said that we must approach that unprecedented environmental catastrophe as if it were an "epidemic," and he vowed to clean up all of the spillage. Why won't he vow to eradicate AIDS? From where I sit, we know far more about stopping the virus than we do about cleaning up deep-water oil spills.

I was at the closing ceremony of the International AIDS Conference in Vienna in July when my colleague Larry Bryant took the stage to tell thousands about the epidemic in Washington, D.C. Jaws literally dropped. People from Haiti and Burundi and South Africa had no idea. I was embarrassed. Here we are, a nation that has allotted more than $1 trillion to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, yet we cannot make the financial commitment to end the killer virus in our own homeland.

Perhaps interrupting President Obama was a little brazen. Believe me, I was caught up in the historic nature of the event, too. I was so nervous that it took me three tries to get up the courage to interrupt the nation's 44th president. It was only when President Obama referred to the ADAP crisis, which he has failed to resolve, that I knew I had no choice but to speak up.

I'm not sorry that I did so, though I knew I would be the proverbial skunk at the party. I got the chance to speak with the president after his speech, an opportunity I otherwise never would have had amid a throng of well-wishers.

Whether or not he acts on them, President Obama heard my concerns. Now we in the AIDS community have to decide if we'll cheerlead -- or demand real change.

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