

Guest Column

A Queer Conscience

Planning Council Requires New Direction

By Greg Scott



In recent months, the People with AIDS Coalition of Broward County (PWAC) attempted to work with the Broward County HIV Health Services Planning Council to address several concerns, most especially the racist language the council employs to exclude gay white men from primary outpatient medical care objectives.

Rather than hear the coalition's concerns, council leaders resorted to procedural maneuvers and personal attacks to avoid the issue and discredit me.

Even two weeks ago, as I stood on the historic steps of the old capitol in Tallahassee, leading a small band of protesters for adequate state AIDS funding, the Sun-Sentinel cited "council leaders" who said I was "over-reacting" and "misinformed" on the issue of federal funding.

Such characterizations are patronizing and inappropriate. In late 1980's Washington, DC, I was among the activists who first lobbied, protested and went to jail to win passage of the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency (CARE) Act, the law under which Broward will receive almost fifteen million dollars in direct assistance this year. I was also among the people with AIDS who defended those funds through the 1990's, and sacrificed my health to participate in the costly, cumbersome, and unnecessarily duplicated planning process the law requires.

I have read and studied both the past years comprehensive HIV health services plan for Broward County, and the planning

council's current grant application. Apparently, some "council leaders" have not — or they would know that their own data are unambiguous.

According to council data, gay white men, or in broader epidemiological terms, white men who have sex with men (WMSM) continue to represent the single largest group of Broward residents with AIDS.

The council's data also shows that WMSM continue to die faster than any other single affected group, and that of all gay men categorized by race they are the least likely to receive services they know they need.

More recent national data show further that Dade, Broward and Palm Beach Counties now lead the nation in new infections among young gay men of all colors and backgrounds, distinguishing our region as the latest "epicenter" of the epidemic.

In spite of these facts, stonewalling planning council leaders continue to defend language that singularly omits all white adult men, including that most severely affected population, WMSM.

At its March 28th meeting, the full council finally seemed eager to discuss the controversial issue, voting overwhelmingly to change the agenda so they could sooner address the relevant item, the report from the Joint Priorities Committee. Provided council staff members have not destroyed the record of the March 28th meeting, as they have admitted to destroying other suspect records, it will show that the council leaders

and all voting members understood that the agenda change was intended to expedite discussion of the exclusionary language. After waiting hours in the overcrowded room for the relevant agenda item, however, people with AIDS were again disappointed when the council leaders still refused to hear the coalition's concerns. Insisting the guests, some now ailing, wait until the chair recognize new business at the end of the meeting, council leaders again demonstrated a willful disregard for the very people they are meant to serve.

Many Express readers will recall that this is not the first occasion issues of race have interfered with the council's vital public business. In fact, months ago, the PWAC determined that the diverse communities affected by AIDS needed to join together in an open dialogue so that we might better work collectively for our shared goals. Believing our upcoming annual health conference, BEACH 2002, might provide a perfect opportunity for such a panel, especially considering the very diverse audience the conference traditionally attracts, we altered our usual educational tracks to accommodate it. We chose as our theme, "Diversity, Unity, and Healing for Challenging Times," and began inviting respected leaders of affected communities to participate.

HIV Health Services Planning Council chairwoman Naomi Parker was among those community leaders who readily promised to

participate, enthusiastically supportive of an open forum on these tough issues. But the day after the disastrous February council meeting, Parker phoned the coalition to withdraw from the event.

In a year of increasing case loads, inflating medical costs, and budget shortfalls, the council needs leaders who embrace all affected communities, so that we may assure assistance follows need — not race, gender, or mode of exposure. The improper destruction of suspect records, the use of procedure to silence the concerns of people with AIDS, and willful personal attacks against the council's critics raise serious questions about the ethics guiding the council and its staff. Have our council leaders purposes other than serving Broward residents living with HIV and AIDS?

If not, then they must change course immediately, promise to eliminate the exclusionary language from future plans if 2002 revisions are no longer possible, and take visible public action to rebuild the public trust they have so lightheartedly wasted. Until then, Madam Chair and the entire council will remain "out of order."

Greg Scott is president of the People with AIDS Coalition of Broward County, an all-volunteer, non-profit organization serving people affected by HIV for thirteen years. Visit the coalition online at pwa.org or phone the coalition at 954.565.9119.

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