

Obama promises commitment to combating HIV/AIDS

July 13 2010, By JULIE PACE , Associated Press Writer



President Barack Obama speaks on the National HIV/AIDS Strategy in the East Room of the White House in Washington, Tuesday, July 13, 2010. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

(AP) -- President Barack Obama said Tuesday a new strategy for combating HIV and AIDS fulfills America's obligation to stopping the spread of the virus and rooting out the inequities and attitudes on which it thrives.

The strategy sets a goal of reducing new infections by 25 percent over the next five years; getting treatment for 85 percent of patients within three months of their diagnosis; and increasing education about the virus, even in communities with low rates of infection.

"Fighting HIV/AIDS in America and around the world will require more

than just fighting the virus," Obama said at a White House reception honoring the work of those in the HIV and AIDS community. "It will require a broader effort to make life more just and equitable."

While medical breakthroughs have greatly improved quality of life for the 1.1 million Americans living with HIV, the U.S. has struggled to lower the rate of new infections. The new strategy sets a goal of reducing new infections by 25 percent over the next five years.

About 56,000 people in the U.S. become infected each year, a rate that has held steady for about a decade.

"We've been keeping pace when we should be gaining ground," said Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius at a separate event unveiling the strategy earlier in the day.

Part of the strategy for lowering new infections relies on targeting HIV prevention efforts at the highest-risk populations, which include gay and bisexual men as well as black Americans, far more than is done today.

That means finding creative ways to spread successful local programs that help HIV-negative people stay that way, as well as providing education and treatment for people who are living with HIV to reduce their chances of spreading the virus, said Chris Collins of the Foundation for AIDS Research, one of the many groups who advised administration officials during the months-long process of devising the strategy.

The administration is allocating \$30 million from the massive health care overhaul Congress passed earlier this year toward implementation of the new plan.

Some AIDS activists criticized the plan for not setting more ambitious goals and for not funding the benchmarks it lays out.

"The president's plan is so flawed that it might actually represent a step backwards in combating HIV and AIDS in the United States," said Charles King, president of Housing Works, a community-based AIDS organization.

The strategy aims to copy some of the steps credited with spurring the success of a Bush administration policy to fight AIDS in hard-hit developing countries. That includes setting specific targets and mandating coordination among different government agencies to guard against missteps and wasted, duplicated efforts.

"We've never had that kind of coordinated, accountable effort to address AIDS in America, and that's what we need," Collins said.

There is a new HIV infection every 9 1/2 minutes in the U.S. But about one of every five people living with HIV doesn't know it.

Access to care plays a role in prevention, too, because the more virus in someone's bloodstream, the easier it is for that person to spread infection through such things as unprotected sex.

In one step toward reducing disparities in access to care, the Obama administration on Friday reallocated \$25 million to states that have waiting lists for their AIDS Drug Assistance Programs, which provide treatment help for the uninsured and underinsured.

The National Alliance of State & Territorial AIDS Directors reported that more than 2,200 people in 12 states were on waiting lists for ADAP help as of last week.

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Citation: Obama promises commitment to combating HIV/AIDS (2010, July 13) retrieved 27 April 2024 from

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