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Remarks of
Patricia S. Fleming
National AIDS Policy Director
to
AIDS Policy Center for Children, Youth & Families

May 1, 1995

GOOD AFTERNOON:

Thank you for that gracious introduction. And thank you for inviting me to speak at your public policy institute.

It's a great pleasure to join you today. Thank you, David Harvey and the AIDS Policy Center, for the invitation to participate.

I'd like to thank each of you not only for being here today but for your leadership every day. You are the soldiers on the front line of our national battle against HIV and AIDS. You cogitate, you deliberate, and you agitate so that our nation and our health care system rise to the challenges that AIDS pose to children, youth, and families.

We in the Clinton Administration join you in this monumental effort to respond to AIDS. I am proud of the fact that in the first two years of President Clinton's term in office, we have increased Federal funding for AIDS research, prevention, and services by thirty percent despite the tremendous pressures of a zero-growth budget. And if the Congress approves the President's fiscal year 1996 budget request, that increase will total forty percent. That is an extraordinary accomplishment.

Included in those funding increases are some vital new resources for the Ryan White CARE Act, a program with which all of you are quite familiar. In his first two years in office, the President increased funding for Ryan White by eighty-two percent, bringing it to full funding. With his fiscal year 1996 budget, the President proposes to bring that increase even higher, to one hundred and eight percent in three years. Those numbers are a tangible sign of the President's commitment to fighting the AIDS epidemic on all fronts.

These investments are paying off. In the past year, I have been encouraged by the progress we have made in research. Working with scientists from across the country and around the world, NIH has made tremendous progress in our understanding of the dynamics of HIV and how it affects the human immune system.

We have produced the first research results to show that we can actually block HIV transmission from mother to child. That is a remarkable breakthrough and one that lightens the hearts of so many of us. It is also the first time scientists have been able to show that a drug can block a retroviral disease of any kind.

In another encouraging direction, an ongoing study of long-term non-progressors may help us induce similar reactions in other HIV-infected people. And the work on protease inhibitors and interleukin-2 therapy are very promising indeed. I'm also encouraged by the work being done to develop a microbicide for women to use privately to protect themselves from HIV without relying on their partners. Funding for such research has more than doubled and we are beginning to make some headway.

At the CDC, we have reinvigorated our HIV prevention effort by investing power in communities and putting the planning process in their hands. The community planning process has been nothing short of remarkable, turning around a program that had gotten too far away from the people it served.

And, in the area of services, we have been able to expand significantly the provision of high-quality medical and social services to people living with HIV and AIDS. As I mentioned earlier, we have already increased funding for the Ryan White CARE Act by eighty-two percent. Last year alone, Ryan White programs paid for more than three hundred thousand client visits across the country.

We have been working with you to turn the scientific results of the 076 trials into public health policy that protects the lives of women and children. We are providing guidelines for health care professionals and for consumers that spell out the necessary steps to be taken to prevent HIV transmission. CDC will soon issue final guidelines on this topic and I look forward to working with you to carry them out. Pregnant women need more information to make the best decisions they can for their health and the health of their babies. And each of you will play a critical role in getting women the services they need. This work should already be underway.

These are substantial accomplishments that all of us can be proud of. But let's not waste any time patting ourselves on the back because there is still a great deal to be done.

When we still have forty thousand new HIV infections in this country every year and ten thousand of them are among teenagers, our work is not finished.

When fourteen thousand women are diagnosed with AIDS in 1994 alone, our work is not finished.

And when two-to-three thousand babies are being born with HIV each year, our work certainly is not finished.

We are, I believe, at a critical turning point in our national response to HIV and AIDS. The next few months will determine whether we will continue to build on the recent progress we have achieved and move forward or whether we will retrench and retreat.

I have been asked to talk about the Republican Contract with America, or as some of

us call it, the Republican Contract on America.

Much has been made about the speed with which the Republican Congress dispatched so many major pieces of legislation. In one hundred days, they managed to pass legislation that will take school lunches away from children and welfare benefits away from poor families. They have voted to weaken our environmental laws and take large corporations off the hook for liability lawsuits. And they have voted to cut the taxes of some of the wealthiest people in our nation. For this they are proud?

Let me talk to you about what else happened during those hundred days. In the last hundred days, approximately twenty-two hundred Americans were diagnosed with AIDS.

In the last hundred days, nearly eleven hundred Americans died of AIDS.

And, in the last hundred days, more than two thousand Americans became infected with HIV and one-quarter of those individuals were under the age of twenty.

But you don't hear the Republicans in Congress talking about those statistics. In fact, you hardly hear them talk about AIDS at all. And when we have heard some Republican leaders talk about AIDS they haven't said much that is worth hearing. Like their predecessors in the Reagan Administration, they choose to pit one group of Americans against another to justify helping neither. When Republican leaders say we are spending too much on AIDS research and not enough on cancer research I think it's important to point out that they are not proposing to increase funding for either.

There have been, however, a few bright notes during these last hundred days. When Republican leaders of the House Appropriations Committee proposed cutting existing funding for the Ryan White CARE Act and for CDC's HIV prevention programs, more than a dozen Republicans joined their Democratic colleagues to overwhelmingly vote it down. And I think one of the reasons that we won that vote is the hard work of people like you who let your legislators know that such cuts are unconscionable.

And, when the Republican leadership proposed eliminating funding for HOPWA, the housing assistance program for people with AIDS, rank-and-file Republicans joined their Democratic colleagues to oppose that cut, too. Yet the House leadership would not allow a vote on an amendment to restore those dollars. Now, it is up to the House-Senate conferees to preserve this vitally important program. And I am urging each of them to retain this vital program.

Of course one of the brightest signs of hope that we have had in the last hundred days was the bipartisan leadership of Senators Nancy Kassebaum and Ted Kennedy to reauthorize the Ryan White CARE Act. I was enormously pleased to see the unanimous vote of the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee in favor of this bill and I look forward to an equally overwhelming show of support by the full Senate later this month.

We will have to be vigilant in the coming weeks to keep the Senate united behind this legislation and to hold off any attempts to weaken this program with mean-spirited and harmful amendments. And that will mean putting aside some of our own differences to make sure this legislation stays on track. If we remain united I believe we can succeed, but if we open the door to division there is no telling what kind of damage can be done.

In particular, we have to stand up against proposals to mandate HIV testing of women, children, or any other population. Good science and good public health have taught us that mandatory testing doesn't work and drives people away from care that they need. You and I know that for HIV counseling and testing to work, they must be voluntary and must rely on the traditional relationship between people and their health care providers. So let's make sure the Congress knows that too.

And we have to make sure they understand that when lawmakers talk about protecting the lives of babies, their proposals have to include real help for babies with HIV and for those without HIV. Empty promises may make good political rhetoric but they don't make good policy.

So, in some ways we have gotten through these first hundred days with a few nicks and cuts but no major injuries. And if we can win on HOPWA I will call this period a success. Our task now is to deal with the next hundred days and we have a number of very difficult challenges ahead of us. I'd like to discuss two of them.

In a week or so the Republican leadership of the Senate Budget Committee will unveil its proposal to balance the federal budget. The plan is expected to include more than one trillion dollars in spending reductions over the next seven years. Let me repeat that -- one trillion dollars in cuts!

To achieve that goal, the Republicans will have to make an average reduction in public health programs of twenty percent below current levels. In other words, they'll take the current spending totals and reduce them by one-fifth. That includes things like AIDS research at NIH, AIDS prevention at CDC, and the Ryan White CARE Act.

And that's not the half of it. Also included in the draft Republican budget is a plan to cut more than one hundred and fifty billion dollars from the Medicaid program over the next five years. One hundred and fifty billion dollars! Can you imagine it. A program that currently covers less than half of all Americans who are in poverty. A program that in some parts of the country pays so little that three-quarters of the physicians won't even participate. A program that forces people to impoverish themselves just to be able to go to the doctor or get a prescription filled. And the Republicans want to cut one hundred and fifty billion dollars!

How will that affect people with AIDS? Well, as you know, today, an estimated forty percent of people with AIDS depend on Medicaid to pay their doctor bills, their

hospital bills, and their prescription drug bills. Without Medicaid, these individuals would have no coverage at all. Where would they go? What insurance company will sell them a policy? And at what price? These are questions that must be answered but they're not even being asked.

And, without Medicaid coverage many women, children, and young adults with HIV and AIDS will have a difficult time getting the services they need to keep them alive and improve the quality of their lives. As participants in the Ryan White Title IV program, you know full well the impact this can have on the people you serve and the programs you direct. A cut in Medicaid of this magnitude will only compound the problems many of you confront every day.

The Clinton Administration is strongly opposing these short-sighted, mean-spirited attacks on the American people. But none of us can afford to stand idly by and watch this kind of destruction take place. We all must stand up to these proposals and make sure they are defeated. So don't think of yourselves as only AIDS experts, when proposals of this kind are being bandied about, you must be Medicaid experts as well. The actions taken by this Congress in the next one hundred days and the one hundred days after that will, in many ways, decide the fate of thousands of Americans who are living with HIV and millions more who must remain free of this disease.

I want to end my remarks today with my favorite quote. It comes from the great labor leader Mother Jones, who said, "We must pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living."

Well, each of us here today has prayed for too many friends and loved ones. We've attended too many memorial services and marched in too many candlelight vigils. Now it's time to fight. To fight for people living with AIDS and to fight for those who are healthy today but could be tomorrow's statistics. And, most of all, we have to fight against policies that take us backward because when it comes to AIDS we can't afford to lose any ground.

Thank you.

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