Firestorm Over Cuts for Palm Beach AIDS Homeless

By Andrew Stephens
Palm Beach Editor
AStephens@OurIndependent.com

There has been considerable controversy lately over the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) plans to recommend a cut in funds for housing people with AIDS in Palm Beach County. "These are times for hard choices," said HUD Acting Secretary Alphonso Jackson.

For the people of Palm Beach County, the HUD choice was to recommend a seven percent decrease in the AIDS housing budget, even though Palm Beach has the fifth-highest AIDS rate in the entire United States. This is the second year in a row that HUD has recommended a budget cut for Palm Beach County, even though South Florida comprises 50 percent of all AIDS case in the state. Fort Lauderdale and Miami are both slated for slight increases.

By contrast, Sarasota's AIDS rate ranks around 30th in the country, yet the HUD choice was to recommend a 45 percent increase for that county.

"Shocking" and "unfair" were a few of the local reactions. *The Palm Beach Post* weighed in with an editorial that inferred political pressure must be behind the disparity. Noting that the only state congressman on a committee that oversees HUD is Sarasota's representative, Katherine Harris, the *Post* linked her "contempt for Palm Beach County" to the local budget cut.

This has set off a firestorm of activity and squabbles, as HUD officials decried the *Post*'s "misrepresentation" of facts, and local AIDS activists were left to wonder if there really might be a conspiracy in the works. AIDS service organizations diplomatically tried to question the cut, but remained wary of "rocking the boat."

The sides were drawn — conspiracy theorists on one side, and battle-weary AIDS workers reluctantly accepting what they were given on the other. Unfortunately, homeless people living with AIDS are caught in the middle.

The Independent researched how HUD determines the planned allocations, and at what point, if any, political influence might be brought to bear. HUD spokesperson Brian Sullivan was adamant that the system was carefully created to prevent such an occurrence.

"These HOPWA (Housing Opportunities for Persons With AIDS) numbers are generated in strict accordance with the law, in a formula that was mandated by Congress years ago — long before Representative Harris was involved in HUD oversight," said Sullivan.

Sullivan explained the process as being similar to simply getting results from a spreadsheet. AIDS case data is plugged into the HOPWA formula, and the results are then passed along to Congress.

There is no room for political favors or other arbitrary add-ons, according to HUD. Although the formula might be convoluted, it is available for public review. (www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/aidshousing/programs/formula/)

The same cannot be said about the actual AIDS case data that HUD uses, however. There are literally dozens of sources for AIDS case data — all of which offer different glimpses into the epidemic at different points in time. Plugged into HUD's formula, virtually all of these figures resulted in an expected budget increase for Palm Beach County, not a decrease. Even some local AIDS experts, attempting to assist *The Independent*, provided non-matching data. The public data seemed to bolster the theory that the HUD formula had not been followed, and that other influence must have played a role.

HUD however, said that they use data that is not immediately available to the public. According to David Vos, HUD's Director of the Office of HIV/AIDS Housing, "The law stipulates that we must use data from the Centers for Disease Control, as of a very specific date [3/31/04].

Under attack: Some blame U.S. Rep. Katherine Harris for Palm Beach County AIDS housing cuts File Photo

Because the formula date prescribed by law does not coincide with a standard CDC reporting cycle, the CDC actually provides HUD with a special data feed for that date."

These numbers will not likely be made public (via the CDC web site) until October of 2005.

Why aren't the numbers given to HUD by the CDC made public? Calls to the CDC by *The Independent* were not returned.

Although not independently verifiable, using the CDC data provided by HUD does indicate a seven percent decrease in AIDS cases in Palm Beach County, and a 38 percent increase in Sarasota. A "high-incidence bonus" makes up the difference, to validate the 45 percent increase figure. The comparatively small operating budget of Sarasota combines to make that figure look even more dramatic. In fact, the entire 45 percent increase for Sarasota is only $177,000 – which is not even enough to make up for the cuts planned in the Palm Beach County budget.

But it is the very notion of any cut at all that has some locals confused.

"How fair is a formula that can result in a budget cut to one of the hardest-hit areas of the state?" asked "John," while waiting for his AIDS medicines at a West Palm Beach pharmacy. "The crisis here has been going on consistently for years, not just 'newly-rising' like it is in Sarasota. But they cut our budget two years in a row? Do they know that we have one of the highest costs of housing and inflation in the state? If there is no additional money available, why can't they just freeze our money? We are still in a crisis here!"

Unlike Sarasota, which had a below-average AIDS rate last year, Palm Beach County has double the national average, and it has had for years. Moreover, housing costs in Palm Beach are nearly 30 percent higher than Sarasota. As *The Palm Beach Post* pointed out, there are people in our county who are dying, waiting for a place to call home.

HUD agrees with a call for a review. "As a matter of fact, the formula has been the focus of scrutiny," revealed Vos.

Last year, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), in cooperation with HUD, conducted a managerial review of the HOPWA planning process. As a result, said Vos, there was a general consensus that the formula "might better serve the needs of communities if it considered factors such as regional cost of living, housing expenses, and long-term trends."

Action Alert:

The Independent applauds the hard work of the people at HUD, and the AIDS workers of this community and elsewhere.

To help all of them achieve our common goal of fairness in the HOPWA formula allocation grants, call your elected officials, or mail them this article. Ask for a review of the HOPWA formula, and timelier public access to HUD's CDC data.

Most importantly, ask that no money should ever be taken away from any county in such desperate need.

U.S. Representative Katherine Harris (HUD Finance Oversight Committee). Phone 800.453.4184