

AIDS Panel Offers Critical Report

Group's Final Work Charges Government With 'Dogged Denial'

Associated Press

The National Commission on AIDS ended its work yesterday with a final report and a warning. Members said the last four years left them frustrated—sometimes to the point of tears—over prejudice and inertia in dealing with the deadly epidemic.

"I think a lot of people in America don't believe the roof is about to cave in on them," said Charles Konigsberg, Delaware's public health director and a member of the commission.

The commission was created by Congress and started work in 1989. In the years that followed, it became the government's nag.

"The failure to respond adequately represents at best continued dogged denial, and at worst a dismaying hidden and unvoiced belief that this is 'just' a disease of gay men and intravenous drug users, both groups that are perceived as disposable," the commission's report said.

The disease has no known cure, but members of the commission said its spread is largely preventable. Nevertheless, the panel's recommendations on prevention, such as sex education and making clean needles available to drug addicts, were largely unheeded.

"It's a failure of political will to carry out effective HIV prevention programs," said Don C. Des Jarlais, a commission member who is a researcher in drug addiction and the spread of the human immunodeficiency virus, which causes AIDS.

The commission, whose members are from both political parties, often criticized the Bush administration for not doing enough about the epidemic and for being squeamish about discussing subjects such as homosexual sex. In its final report, the commission said, "New hope surged with the election of President Clinton."

The Clinton administration has proposed a 1994 budget that includes \$2.7 billion for AIDS research, treatment and prevention, a 28 percent increase over this year's spending. The report said, however, that while Clinton was sympathetic and had promised much, he had yet to deliver.

Although members of the commission have been openly critical, they tempered their remarks after Clinton's appointment Friday of Kristine M. Gebbie as the government's AIDS policy coordinator.

"We're pleased that the Clinton administration has finally started its engine on AIDS," said David E. Rogers, the commission's vice chairman.



June Osborn and David Rogers led the National Commission on AIDS, which said the government has failed "to respond adequately" to the epidemic.

For some commission members, the disease is more than an abstract public health menace. The Rev. Scott Allen, a panel member from Texas, lost his wife and a son to AIDS. He has another son and a brother who are infected with HIV. "Have we reached the point where an unacceptable epidemic becomes acceptable?" he asked.

And for Mary Fisher, HIV is even more personal: She has it. A year ago, Fisher brought the Republican National Convention to silence as she lectured the delegates on the pain of AIDS and the danger of denial. She did so again yesterday at a news conference where the commission report was released.

Fisher contracted HIV from her former husband, who died just over a week ago. She cried as she described taking her sons to stand at the grave of their father. "I will not go passively or quietly," she said.

She offered advice to the Clinton administration: "Lead. Stand up and speak for those hundreds of thousands whose voices have been stilled."

[In response to the report, Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna E. Shalala told reporters that she had had breakfast with AIDS commission members yesterday and had said, "Keep criticizing us," Washington Post staff writer David S. Broder reported.

[In light of what is a worldwide, terrible tragedy, everybody ought to keep our feet to the fire and make sure we are doing everything possible," Shalala said. "Until we have a vaccine, a first-class education campaign and a strategy for changing risky behavior that leads to AIDS, any criticism is justified, and I'm not going to be uptight or resentful."]