

'Failure of leadership' costing more lives, AIDS panel says

Political shuffling seen as big culprit

By Erica A. Littlejohn
WASHINGTON BUREAU

Washington — The National Commission on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome ended a four-year study of the AIDS crisis Monday with a final report that criticized "a failure of leadership" in fighting the epidemic.

"A strong, consistent voice of leadership could have steered courses of action that might have interrupted the relentless continuation of HIV spread," said Dr. June Osborn, chairwoman of the commission, "instead of silently tolerating the epidemic's escalation."

Since the first AIDS cases were reported 12 years ago, more than 289,000 AIDS cases and 179,000 deaths have been recorded, according to the panel's report, "AIDS: An Expanding Tragedy."

It said that at least 1 million people are infected with the HIV virus, leading to as many as 80,000 new cases of AIDS annually.

While the number of new cases among homosexuals is expected to stabilize by 1995, the rate of infection among heterosexuals, women, adolescents and minorities is expected to rise.

"We were given an early warning by the gay community that we failed to take notice of," Dr. Osborn said.

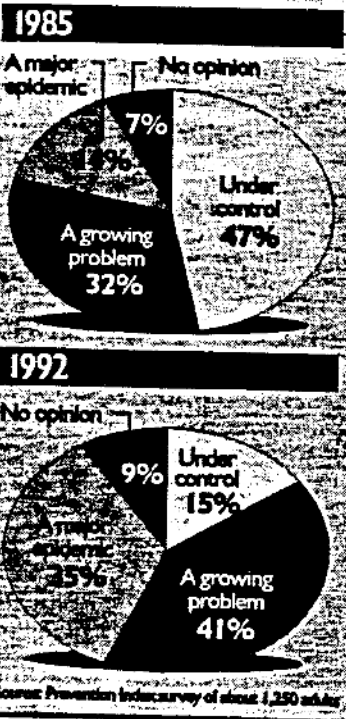
Although "new hope surged with the election of President Clinton," the report said, "now there is cause for serious concern that the response to the epidemic is again tangled in politics."

"The appalling lack of frank discussion about the epidemic at all levels of national leadership fostered a woefully inadequate

What people think about AIDS

Over the past seven years, more people have begun to view AIDS as a growing health threat, according to a recent study by Prevention magazine.

How those surveyed view AIDS:



response, yielding death and suffering well in excess of what might have been," it said.

Donald Goldman, a commission member, said that because leaders have not been frank about AIDS, many people still do not realize that "there is no cure. The idea that there will one day be some technology out for the terrible problems we face," he said, "is as unrealistic as the adolescent who has sex without a condom... and believes he is invincible."

"If Clinton spoke today, and spoke effectively, thousands of

lives would be saved," Mr. Goldman said. "The lives we save today are cases that would occur in the next decade."

Another commissioner, Dr. Charles Konigsberg, complained that the AIDS fight has been hampered by numerous "restrictions on what you can and cannot teach."

The commission repeatedly has called for more sex education in schools, distribution of condoms, access to clean syringes for drug users and drug rehabilitation programs. But some groups have argued that the proper way to fight the epidemic is to promote moral behavior such as abstinence from sex and drugs.

"The moral thing to do is to give lifesaving information to our teenagers," said Dr. David Rogers, vice chairman of the commission.

The 15-member commission will officially go out of business in September. It was created by Congress in 1989 to help Congress design a national policy on AIDS.

As it ends its four years of work on AIDS, the commission has made two final recommendations. It encouraged leaders at all levels to speak out to their constituents and develop a clear plan to confront AIDS.

"We will perish without moral leadership," said Commissioner Mary Fisher, who offered her personal message for Mr. Clinton and recently appointed AIDS czar Kristine Gebbie.

"We must speak thoughtfully, boldly and consistently," she said. "If we lower our voice... we have failed not only at public policy, but at public trust. Remember the promise of leadership and lead."