

Posted 9/14/2003 5:10 PM

## Top Democrats say Bush policy will weaken HIV prevention programs

By Steve Sternberg, USA TODAY

A new Bush administration policy that imposes a new layer of state or local review on federally funded HIV prevention programs has drawn a stern rebuke from top congressional Democrats.

Reps. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., Nanci Pelosi, D-Calif., and Steny Hoyer, D-Md., objected to the policy in a Sept. 11 letter to Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson.

They urged Thompson to reconsider the policy, which they say could paralyze AIDS prevention initiatives and weaken local efforts to slow the spread of the deadly AIDS virus, HIV, which infects at least 40,000 people each year and kills 20,000 others.

"The process that's now in place has worked well for over a decade," Waxman said. "My fear is that the new requirement would politicize prevention, so that conservatives who are offended by new HIV prevention messages could ignore the urgency of the message and turn it into something bland and ineffective."

They also objected to a planned revision of decade-old content guidelines for HIV-prevention programs that they say may threaten AIDS-prevention efforts.

HHS spokesman Tony Jewell said Thompson will consider whether to act on the trio's complaints.

Under the old policy, AIDS service organizations that get Centers for Disease Control and Prevention funding through state or local health departments submit their AIDS prevention messages to a review board made up of state health officials, prevention experts and advocates.

These panels must decide whether the messages adequately describe the dangers of high-risk sexual behaviors and "explain less risky practices."

By law, prevention programs also must caution against "the harmful effects of promiscuous sexual activity" and encourage abstinence. Federal funds cannot be used to support any program "designed to promote or encourage" sexual activity or drug abuse.

The new policy requires additional screening by state and local health officials, who depend heavily on federal funding, Waxman said. They must now "independently" make sure AIDS prevention programs follow these guidelines.

Prodded by conservatives in Congress, the CDC has begun audits of several HIV/AIDS prevention programs and threatened one, the Stop AIDS Project! in San Francisco with a loss of \$700,000 in federal funding for using explicit language in workshop titles that seems to encourage sex.



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Jewell says Thompson and CDC Director Julie Gerberding are determined to reduce the number of new infections, which has remained stable for years.