AIDS Activists Protest NYC Health Commissioner for CDC Head

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President Obama may nominate New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene Commissioner Thomas Frieden, MD, MPH, to succeed Julie Gerberding, MD, as the head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), The *Wall Street Journal* reports. In direct response to that news, an alliance of AIDS organizations and advocates gathered February 3 on the snowy steps of City Hall to protest Frieden's possible appointment to head the CDC.

Charles King, the president and CEO of Housing Works, an organization that advocates for homeless and low-income New Yorkers living with HIV, called Frieden's approach to health care "dogmatic," saying he does not want to see the commissioner's approach to HIV treatment and prevention echoed across the nation.

"Frieden's refusal to support early intervention with things like housing and nutrition, and his tax on small community-based organizations that provide these services, are examples of what we don't want to see replicated around the country," King said. He also voiced disapproval of Frieden's support for eliminating required informed written consent before an HIV test.

The attention-grabbing attempt to persuade President Obama to consider other candidates for the position was also attended by representatives from Bronx AIDS Services, Bailey House, Positive Health Project, New York Harm Reduction Educators, Center for HIV Law and Policy, Family Health Project, Hispanic AIDS Forum, HIV Law Project and Lower East Side Harm Reduction.

Regina Quattrochi, CEO of Bailey House, another New York housing and support organization catering to HIV-positive homeless people, emphasized why the HIV community needs a director who will work closely with HIV-positive people and affected communities around America.

"I think it's time that we have a leader in the CDC who is willing to go out and speak to people living with HIV/AIDS and get a sense of what they need," Quattrochi said. She added that a number of AIDS advocacy groups who had worked with Mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration before Frieden's 2002 appointment to his current position have been disengaged from policy decisions leading to the demise of available HIV/AIDS services.

While some criticize Frieden's HIV/AIDS health policies, he is widely celebrated for his ban on restaurants' use of trans fats—an unsaturated fat used in fatty foods—and for banning smoking in

bars, restaurants and workplaces. The commissioner also spearheaded efforts in New York to increase HIV testing, encourage needle exchange programs and distribute millions of free condoms.

“I’ve been doing this work since 1994, and he’s the first health commissioner to really go after the HIV orthodoxy with an eye toward bringing solutions,” Dennis deLeon, president of the Latino Commission on AIDS, told The Associated Press. “I feel very strongly about that. And he’s not afraid to take on the keepers of the flame.”

However, King affirms that Frieden’s model for health care is not sufficiently comprehensive and places too much emphasis on treatment while ignoring other key interventions. “We’re not going to end HIV simply by testing people and, when they get sick enough, putting them on medication,” he said. “If we’re going to be serious about ending HIV, we need to look at some of the psychosocial and economic issues that are fueling this disease.”

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