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March 26, 2003

The ABCs of hope

Joseph R. Pitts

On Thursday, March 13, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) announced a new HIV/AIDS initiative in the CORE program (Communities Responding to the HIV/AIDS Epidemic) "designated to promote relationships with community and faith-based groups."

According to USAID, "This new initiative is a key component of President Bush's efforts to fight HIV/AIDS."

In announcing the award, Dr. Anne Peterson, assistant administrator for global health at USAID, acknowledged that: "We cannot win this war against AIDS without much broader partnerships with faith and community-based organizations. These organizations know their community and are a part of their community."

Faith-based organizations encourage positive choices and have been the only consistently successful groups in the battle against AIDS. These groups tell people, "There's a better way." They offer people proven alternatives to avoid infection and live better lives.

To this point, efforts to combat AIDS have focused primarily on management of the disease, saying in effect to AIDS victims, "Here's a clean needle, knock yourself out." No serious thought has been given to behavior change and millions have died as a result of this failed "safe sex" strategy.

That is, except for Uganda. In the late 1980s, Uganda instituted what became known as the ABC program (abstinence before marriage, being faithful to one partner, before condoms). As a result, HIV infection rates plunged from 18.5 percent in 1995 to 8.3 percent at the end of 1999. The focus on positive life choices, like abstinence and monogamy, delayed the onset of teenage

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sexual activity and reduced the number of sexual partners among adults. By contrast, countries like Kenya that focus on condom use primarily, continue to suffer from monumental HIV infection rates.

Enter faith-based organizations. Uganda's program captures much of what faith-based organizations have said for years — there is hope for a better life and a way to make better choices.

In fact, on Dec. 24, 2002, Andrew Natsios, USAID administrator, made the priorities of the ABC program official United States policy.

So, one would think the CORE program would give priority for funding to programs that follow the Uganda model — faith-based organizations that emphasize abstinence, being faithful to one partner and then condom use.

But that hasn't happened. The 5-year, \$50 million agreement was made with "a consortium of international development and faith-based organizations," yet it only lists one group in the consortium, the international organization CARE.

In fact, CARE has partnered with the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health's Center for Communication Programs (CCP), the International HIV/AIDS Alliance in Brighton, U.K., the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), and the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva to manage these funds.

A look at the records of these "partners" hardly reveals a group committed to the stated policy of the United States. Instead, they buy into the "safe sex" myth of battling AIDS that to this point has failed miserably.

The International HIV/AIDS Alliance, for example, wants to legalize prostitution and use funds for needle-exchange programs. In a document titled, "Prevention must be central to the global response to AIDS," International HIV/AIDS Alliance has written:

"Laws and practices that are a barrier to effective prevention must be reformed, in particular laws that disinherit women and children, marginalize sex workers and men who have sex with men, or prohibit the distribution of safe needles and syringes."

Under links on the International HIV/AIDS Alliance's web page, it lists first among "Prevention Websites," The International Union of Sex Workers, a group that says, "We demand: Decriminalization of all aspects of sex work involving consenting adults."

This is where our tax money is going.

Can we really trust this group to adhere to the ABC



model that is supposedly United States policy? Is this even what they've been asked to do?

Over the five years of the award, CARE hopes that "the consortium will build the capacity of community- and faith-based organizations through small grants, which will scale up successful small projects and facilitate the exchange of information and expertise."

A noble goal and one I fully support, as long as these funds go to faith-based programs that stick to the principles behind the ABC program — abstinence, monogamy and only then condoms.

Given CARE's record of supporting the discredited idea of "safe sex" — condom use, legalized prostitution, abortion, and needle exchange — how are we to trust they will adjust their strategy to fund programs that actually make a difference? We can't.

USAID knows this money will find its way to groups like the International HIV/AIDS alliance and will end up funding prostitution and needle exchange. That is why they only mentioned CARE in their news release on the grant.

USAID must fund programs that work, stick to the president's principles, and offer people hope.

The president's agenda is being betrayed by his own political appointees at USAID.

The millions afflicted with AIDS are being abandoned by those who claim to offer help.

And organizations actually making a difference, are being betrayed by a government that has promised reinforcements on the front lines of the war against HIV/AIDS.

• *Joseph R. Pitts is a Republican member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Pennsylvania.*

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