

Funding Proposals Advance in House and Senate

June 27, 2007
by Bob Roehr

The President's Emergency Plan for AID Relief (PEPFAR) will receive an increase of \$1.25 billion, to \$5.08 billion, for the next fiscal year. The U.S. House of Representatives passed the Bush proposal for international HIV programs on June 22.

Of equal importance, it took a baby step toward rolling back some of the restrictions that social conservatives have imposed on the program. It modified the current requirement that a third of prevention funding go to abstinence only programs, giving the President authority to waive that provision should he see fit.

Social conservatives fought hard to restore the more restrictive language but failed on a vote of 200 to 226. The vote was largely along party lines, but 15 Democrats crossed one way while 10 Republicans crossed in the other direction to assure the victory.

The second provision allows the federal government to provide contraceptive materials, including condoms, to international organizations that provide abortions as part of their comprehensive reproductive health services. That prohibition, often referred to as the Mexico City policy, had been in place since the Reagan administration.

The battle was hard-fought and the outcome even closer, 205 to 218, a bare majority of the House. Some 25 Democrats defected from their party on that vote, with 12 Republicans supplying the margin of victory.

Chief sponsor Nita Lowey, D-N.Y., said, "What I did was put in a very narrow provision that will reduce abortion, unintended pregnancy and reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS."

Supporters of reproductive rights bit their tongues, acknowledging the politically difficult situation. While right-winger Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, said Lowey was pushing to make the US "a merchant of abortion...America will be known as an exporter of death."

It is unlike the current occupant of the White House will avail himself of the flexibility that these provisions allow. The provision affecting the Mexico City policy may even draw a rare presidential veto.

The Senate Appropriations Committee cut \$28.5 million from what President Bush requested for community based abstinence only programs when it met on June 21. Earlier in the month a House subcommittee increased funding for those programs by \$27 million, much to the dismay of liberal supporters of science based programs for reproductive health.

Human Rights Campaign president Joe Solmonese used the carrot approach, praising the Senate committee for reducing funding for "programs [that] are ineffective and based on narrow right wing ideology."

But that wasn't enough for Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "The fact that Congress is allocating even one dollar to a thoroughly debunked and harmful program is an outrage...Abstinence only programs are a sham and congressional Democrats can and must defund those programs now."

The measure also offers a modest \$33 million increase for all of Ryan White AIDS programs, and almost a billion dollars more for NIH, one of the most popular of all federal programs. It offered no increase in HIV prevention programs at the CDC, even though the Bush administration had asked for an additional \$93 million.