

Letter from Southeast RVP Thurston Smith to Congressional Black Caucus members

June 7, 2002

Congressional Black Caucus
POLITICAL EDUCATION & LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE
Environmental Justice and Health Brain Trust
1701 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20006

Dear Congressman Clyburn, & Congresswoman Christian-Christensen:

Thank you for coming here to Charleston, South Carolina, to discuss health and environmental justice.

I represent, NAADAC, The Association for Addiction Professionals. NAADAC members serve patients with alcohol and drug disorders who routinely face discrimination by diagnosis, in addition to discrimination by race, class and income. Many of our patients also have co-occurring mental and medical disorders.

According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) alcohol and drug dependency is a treatable brain disease and alcohol and drug abuse is a preventable behavior. Millions of Americans cannot access treatment, and many who receive treatment are "under-treated". Treatment delayed or deprived, is treatment denied. Alcohol and drug disorders correlate highly with HIV, TB, and Hepatitis B and C infection. It also correlates highly with premature, accidental and violent death, domestic violence and suicide.

Our nation has chosen an incarceration policy rather than a public health policy. Domestic law enforcement consumes 50% of the national drug control budget. Treatment and prevention only receive 33%. Sixty percent of the two million Americans currently incarcerated are non-violent drug related offenders. This policy has fallen heavily on the black community.

According to Human Rights Watch, while only 13% regular drug users are black, African Americans constitute 62.7 % of drug offenders admitted to prison. Black men are admitted to state prison for drug offenses at a rate 13.4 times greater than that of white men. Here in South Carolina, for the decade 1986 to 1996, the white incarceration rate for drug offenses declined by 32% while the black drug offense incarceration rate rose by 270%.

I know the Congressional Black Caucus is concerned about this disparity and injustice. May I suggest some specific issues for the Congressional Black Caucus to address?

1. Ask the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) to lift the ban on Medicaid benefits for residents of alcohol and drug treatment facilities. This Institution for Mental Diseases (IMD) exclusion denies primary health care to patients in early addiction recovery.
2. Repeal the lifetime ban on welfare (TANF) and food stamp benefits to persons with felony drug convictions. The ban places an undue burden on women with children seeking recovery.

3. Reform the Higher Education Act to repeal the ban on financial aid for students with drug offenses.
4. Pass Mental Health Parity in this Congress. Alcohol and drug treatment services are excluded from H.R. 4066 and S. 543. This is discrimination by diagnosis and should be corrected.
5. Reject so called "charitable choice" provisions that turn back civil rights protections. Charitable choice also diminishes science-based health care for alcohol and drug disorders.
6. Restore judicial discretion, support alternative sentencing, and bring crack cocaine sentencing guidelines on par with powdered cocaine.
7. Expand opiate replacement treatment and needle exchange.

Sincerely yours,

Thurston S. Smith
NAADAC Southeast Regional Vice-President

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