



Gay, AIDS orgs attend White House forum

Groups to seek inclusion of gay families in health reform

By LOU CHIBBARO JR | Mar 6, 12:33 PM

The heads of two national LGBT civil rights groups and three national AIDS organizations joined representatives of other advocacy groups at the White House on Thursday in expressing support for President Obama's plans for overhauling the nation's health care system.

Obama's administration invited the advocacy groups along with about 55 Democratic and Republican members of Congress to participate in a special White House Forum on Health Reform, with the objective of persuading Congress to approve a health reform package this year.

"We're concerned because over 50 percent of the people living with HIV/AIDS in this country are not in care and treatment right now," said Rebecca Haag, president of AIDS Action, which represents AIDS service providers throughout the country.

"What we're really hoping health care reform will do is insure that everyone's covered so that there's never any question about going to a doctor, getting tested and getting care and treatment," she said.

Haag talked to the Blade about the forum in the White House East Room minutes after the president spoke to about 150 people participating in the event's opening session.

Joining Haag at the forum were Joe Solmonese, president of the Human Rights Campaign; **Rea Carey, president of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force**; Frank Oldham, president and CEO of the National Association of People With AIDS; and Paul Kawata, president of the National Minority AIDS Council.

In his opening remarks at the forum, Obama called on the attending members of Congress and others to redouble their efforts to reach a bipartisan compromise and secure quick approval of sweeping reforms in a health care system he described as broken.

"We're here today to discuss one of the greatest threats not just to the well-being of our families and the prosperity of our businesses, but the very foundation of our economy — and that's the exploding costs of health care in America today," the president told the East Room gathering.

"In the last eight years, premiums have grown four times faster than wages," he said. "An additional 9 million Americans have joined the ranks of the uninsured."

Following the opening session, participants moved to smaller breakout sessions and discussed ways to reach an agreement on a reform package. Officials then returned to the East Room, where Obama entered the room with Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) at his side.

Kennedy, one of Congress' strongest supporters of LGBT rights and who is undergoing treatment for brain cancer, received a prolonged standing ovation.

At Obama's invitation, Republican congressional leaders, including Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), joined their Democratic counterparts in expressing a willingness to work with the president to reach a compromise solution to health care.

Solmonese and **Carey** told the Blade their respective organizations would closely monitor reform proposals to make sure they include fair coverage for people with AIDS and households headed by same-sex couples.

"As we talk about new and different ways to provide health care opportunities to all Americans, and obviously for our community, there are issues that we're looking at," Solmonese said. "We're looking at things like bringing down the tax on domestic partnership benefits, which would clearly bring down a real hurdle for members of our community in terms of accessing health care."

Solmonese was referring to current federal tax law that requires gays who obtain health insurance coverage for their domestic partners through their employer to pay taxes on that benefit as if it were income. Married opposite-sex couples receive the same benefit tax free. He said HRC also would push a number of other pending legislative proposals pertaining to health, including the Early Treatment for HIV and AIDS Act.

Carey said the Task Force is advocating for full inclusion of same-sex families as the Obama reform package moves forward.

"Our community has expressed concerns for many years about access to health care, about things very important to us, like how is family defined when we talk about health care," she said. "Particularly through an employer, it's often described as a spouse or a child. Certainly our community has been left out of that definition for many years because of the inability to get married or to adopt children together.

"So as we move forward on policy matters and legislatively, we'll be working to make sure that our families are represented in the discussion and that our lives are not discounted or left behind from some of the discussion."

The forum marked the most recent White House event to which LGBT or AIDS group leaders have been invited since Obama became president in January. Last month, Solmonese and Justin Nelson, executive director of the National Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce, participated in a White House summit on fiscal responsibility, which addressed ways to boost the nation's faltering economy.