

H 237

Testimony Appropriations Committee  
Yvette Bello- Latino Community Services  
2 March 2011

Good afternoon Senator Stillman, Representative Ritter, Senator Slossberg, Representative Lyddy, Senator Toni Harp, Representative Toni Walke, Senator Prague, Representative Abercrombie

My name is Yvette Bello and I'm the Executive Director of Latino Community Services, Inc. a 25 year old nonprofit organization that offers a comprehensive range of prevention and care services for people at risk for and living with HIV/AIDS with a particular focus on Latinos. I am also a Commissioner on the Hartford Commission on HIV/AIDS, a member of the Ryan White Planning Council, a board member of the CT AIDS Resource Coalition, and a board member with CT Nonprofits.

The Governor has proposed many future focused initiatives to once again revive Connecticut's economy while vowing to protect the safety net for our state's most vulnerable populations. He has entrusted legislative leadership to be courageous and not to succumb to short sighted political goals but to resurrect the values that will propel Connecticut to the bleeding edge of progress.

Many of us in the HIV/AIDS fields experience shaky funding at best while the community's demand for our service continues to increase. This uncertainty around funding threatens our very effectiveness. While all that is considered a part of the inevitable carnage of legislative sessions where there are winners and losers, I urge you to be mindful of what a half a million dollar reduction to the AIDS services line means to the citizens of this state. It means that many more people won't know their HIV status until they are sick. It means many more people not knowing how to protect themselves properly. It means people battling addiction not knowing how to reduce their harm. It means people already living with HIV/AIDS, and weary about the healthcare system, have an increased risk of medical isolation. It means that those who are already on the brink of extreme poverty will not be able to afford living with this disease. It may mean people choosing between waiting for a doctor see them for hours or going to work instead. For some, frankly speaking it means either living with this disease or succumbing to it.

At Latino Community Services we are a part of the solution. For every dollar in funding that we receive from the state, we attract three from other sources. These additional funds act as multipliers of state dollars that stabilize and address needs that state funds cannot. Specifically, I'm here to urge you NOT to accept the cuts to the AIDS Services line. We've said all along that we are willing to shoulder our share of the burden of the state's fiscal crisis, but not to the tune of half a million dollars.

I will leave the statistics out of this but I would like to share a story that illustrates that work still needs to be done.

In 2005, shortly after joining Latino Community Services, I sat in on an interview with a client in our agency. I sat and observed the conversation between "Wanda" and my Executive Director at the time. Wanda shifted in her seat as she was asked to share how she came to be a client of Latino Community Services and what it means to have a resource like LCS in her life. She leaned back in her chair took a breath and began her story. She was living in Puerto Rico with her husband and children.

Her husband worked as a construction worker. In 1999 he became ill. As the provider for his family his priority was his job and not his health. His symptoms consisted of a cough that he couldn't shake and over time his condition worsened and progressed to pneumonia. After a while, he went to see the doctor and at that point there was nothing they could do. She was told he had AIDS and died shortly after being told.

She shifted again in her seat and recalled not knowing what that was. She was told that it was because he had it that she needed to get tested and she did. She was diagnosed positive for HIV. She admitted that when she first found out about the diagnosis, in fear she obsessively used bleach in her home and sometimes washed her children with the chemical to protect them. She was truly afraid and in her words disgusted by it.

Wanda straightened up in her chair and described when she first heard of Latino Community Services. In 2000, LCS embarked in a partnership with agencies in Puerto Rico to identify people living with HIV who wanted to relocate to Connecticut to get better healthcare and support for their diagnosis. Wanda was one of them. She had 4 t-cells and the virus in the millions, clinically she had AIDS. Once in CT, she stabilized she eventually brought her children with her and in 2001. While planning for her daughter's sweet 15, her daughter became very ill and was eventually tested for HIV. 2 weeks before her 15th birthday Wanda learned her youngest child in fact had HIV. She described this as the worst day of her life. She described how the agency had taught her how to live with her disease and gave her hope. As much as she tried to stay positive and move forward, the disease was a constant source of guilt. Guilt set in again for her and as a mother blamed herself however unrealistic that blame was. She got all the help we had but the support we could give could not remedy that blame. I lost Wanda in 2008. She was 46.

Wanda was not any different from anyone in a marriage, or maybe anyone of us in this room for that matter, yet the guilt she carried was palatable. I credit Wanda for teaching me that for all the statistics, websites, podcasts, advanced testing techniques, conference calls, RFP's, grant awards, and legislative sessions that we have about HIV/AIDS, Wanda, a Spanish speaking, heterosexual, mom of three, didn't know about HIV. She didn't know how to protect herself or her children and she didn't know how she could live with that misplaced guilt.

If these cuts go through, I fear I will meet more Wanda's. I fear these cuts, as tame as they seem, will force us to fight HIV/AIDS with the same tools on a very different battlefield. A battlefield with internet hook up sites and prime time shows that sensationalize risky behavior. The very fragile safety net we now have in place will be strained and I'm not sure we can rise to the expectations without your continued support.

I call on all of you once again, to stave off these cuts to ensure that people with HIV/AIDS, families, poor people, the elderly and those with disabilities -- are not sacrificed.

Thank you for your time. I'm happy to answer any questions you might have.