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NC Falls Far Behind in AIDS Treatment

Rick Warren gets it. Rev. Warren, pastor of the 22,000 member Saddleback Church in California, has become a leading voice among evangelical Christians with his best-selling books *The Purpose Driven Church* and *The Purpose Drive Life*. So, what has Warren figured out? That people living with HIV/AIDS are not suffering a deserved judgment from God. "It's not a sin to be sick," according to Warren, and he is using his influence in the evangelical world to persuade pastors to start compassionate HIV/AIDS ministries.

Former senator Jesse Helms gets it. Several years ago Senator Helms was convinced by Bono, lead singer of the rock group U2, that the AIDS pandemic in Africa was a humanitarian crisis worthy of immediate action. Since then the two men have joined forces to raise funds and gather support for the millions of people living with this dreaded disease in Africa.

So, the question is, why doesn't the state of North Carolina get it? If conservative religious and political figures are joining their voices with many others calling for compassionate actions and legislation for those who suffer with HIV/AIDS, why does our state continue to let poor people die of this disease when there are drugs that could keep them alive?

The Ryan White AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP) is a federally-funded program that provides FDA-approved HIV drugs to low-income people who have limited or no coverage from private insurance or Medicaid. This program was started by the federal government as a way of making protease inhibitors, the drugs that turn an HIV diagnosis from a death sentence into a chronic disease, affordable for poor people. Because the drugs cost at least \$13,000 a year, this program is the difference between life and death for poor people living with HIV/AIDS.

Each state uses their own formula to decide who is eligible for the ADAP program. In Mississippi a person who makes \$38,280 or less is eligible for these life-saving drugs. In Arkansas you can earn \$28,710 or less and be eligible. In Alabama the cutoff is \$23,925.

What is the largest amount of money poor people living in North Carolina can earn and be eligible for the medicine that will keep them alive? \$11,962. That's right. If you have an HIV diagnosis in North Carolina, and you make more than \$11,962, you

are not eligible for financial help to purchase drugs that cost \$13,000 a year. North Carolina ranks dead last in the nation in providing funds for HIV/AIDS medication.

Here is what it boils down to for low-income citizens living with HIV/AIDS in North Carolina. You can quit your job and be eligible for the drugs that will keep you alive, but then you won't have money for food, housing, and other essentials. Or, you can keep your job, but then you won't be able to afford the life-saving medication. And the sad truth is that even those who choose the first option are stuck on a waiting list before they can get the drugs they need. Are these the kinds of choices we want our neighbors to make?

The obvious question is why does our state that has a deeply religious ethos have such a poor track record of caring for people with HIV/AIDS? Homophobia is an obvious answer, but statistics show that most people contracting this disease in our state today are not gay. Another possibility is the perception that people who get HIV/AIDS have no one to blame but themselves. But would we deny a person with lung cancer chemotherapy because he had been a life-long smoker? Maybe we should listen to Rick Warren when he reminds us that it is not a sin to be sick.

In this season when we give gifts and anticipate the new year, perhaps the best gift North Carolina could give our sisters and brothers living with HIV/AIDS in 2006 is a chance to live. Let us show our political leaders in the General Assembly that we get it by demanding a more humane approach in caring for our fellow citizens who have contracted this awful disease. After all, do we really want to rank dead last in compassion?

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