

Activists Blast CDC HIV Prevention Effort

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ATLANTA - AIDS groups gathered Tuesday to criticize a new federal HIV prevention policy, which they say focuses too much on people who already have the virus that causes AIDS and not enough on people at risk.

About 250 activists gathered after sessions of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National HIV Prevention Conference here to criticize the federal agency's new policy.

The initiative, launched by director Dr. Julie Gerberding in April, focuses efforts on preventing HIV patients from infecting others. Activists fear a loss of funding for their own programs to pay for the new effort, which they say may overlook many who are at risk for HIV.

"I love them - because of CDC, I'm still alive," said Deadra Green of the Minority AIDS Coalition of Jacksonville, Fla., a 43-year-old who has lived with AIDS for a decade. "But we as a people have got to step to the forefront and start getting organized nationally."

Unlike previous years, the agency did not seek the input of HIV and AIDS groups in creating the initiative, activists said.

CDC officials said the initiative was needed because HIV prevention efforts had stalled and the number of new U.S. HIV infections - about 40,000 a year - has leveled off instead of dropped.

"We wouldn't want all of our efforts targeted on the general population because that would not result in an effective program," said Dr. Ronald Valdiserri, a CDC deputy director.

But activists said the federal plan retreats from counseling and risk-reduction services such as condom distribution and outreach programs.

"It would be a mistake to focus exclusively on HIV-positive people," said David Harvey of the AIDS Alliance for Children, Youth and Families.

Other groups said activists' concerns are starting to be addressed.

"It has been very clear that CDC is saying that they're being very flexible and there's things yet to be determined," said Julie Davids of Community HIV and AIDS Mobilization for Power.