

## U.S. Civil Rights Commission's Stake in the AIDS Battle

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*New York Times* (1923-Current file); May 18, 1988; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times  
pg. A30

### Letters

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### To the Editor:

You noted in an April 13 news article that the AIDS study by the United States Commission on Civil Rights was "stirring opposition in Congress and among homosexuals." Because we believe the opposition to be ill-informed of the study's purpose, allow us to set the record straight.

Last November, the commission formally approved a project to study the civil rights aspects of public health policies and initiatives to control AIDS. There are three components to the study: the transmissibility of AIDS, allegations of discrimination against persons afflicted with AIDS and the extent to which according civil rights protections to AIDS carriers would jeopardize public health.

The transmissibility issue was described as "the threshold question," which must be addressed in order to reach properly the discrimination issues. Accordingly, one panel will provide an overview of the transmissibility of the HIV virus and other opportunistic infections. The other panels will address such issues as protection for both healthy and infected inmates of prisons, the disproportionate number of AIDS cases among minority groups, housing discrimination, schoolchildren with AIDS, the risk to health-care providers and their duty to provide care, and testing

for insurance and other purposes.

Like all recent commission consultations and hearings, this study will be balanced and comprehensive. Witnesses will include representatives of homosexual-rights groups and medical associations, public health officials, alleged victims of discrimination due to AIDS, prisoners, health-care providers and insurance industry representatives. There will be an open session during which anyone may present relevant testimony.

Even before being heard, the commission has generated much controversy with this study. It is, however, not in business to shy away from controversy. School desegregation was, and is, a controversial issue, as was the desegregation of public accommo-

dations. Affirmative action quotas, comparable worth, the equal rights amendment, Indian civil rights, I.Q. testing and protections for handicapped newborns are all highly controversial issues which this commission has addressed or is addressing.

Much of the current controversy has centered on allegations that the witness list for the AIDS hearing will reflect a bias, although panelists' identities were unknown to those making the allegations. We believe that that list shows a proper balance.

Our purpose is to appraise U.S. laws and policies with respect to discrimination. If AIDS is indeed the greatest threat to the nation's public health, measures proposed to stop its spread may be severe. Our task is to deliberate fully on all civil rights implications of such measures and to make recommendations to Congress and to the President. Only then can we guarantee that the rights and duties of all concerned have been properly considered.

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Washington, May 11, 1988

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