



Public Health and the Denial of Democracy in Washington, DC

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Americans living in our nation's capital pay the highest per capita federal income taxes. They serve our country during war. They are subject to federal laws. Yet, they have no vote in the U.S. House of Representatives or the U.S. Senate. And while DC residents have a locally elected mayor and city council, all locally passed laws, as well as DC's local budget, must be sent to Congress for review and approval.

In many cases, Congress overrules decisions of the locally elected government, and they have even overturned citizen-passed ballot initiatives. As a result, the most critical needs of Washingtonians are routinely neglected by Congress. Often, it is DC's most vulnerable populations who are put at greatest risk. The negative economic impact of political disenfranchisement on DC's residents is well documented. Now, attention is being given to its effects on DC's public health. **Consider these examples:**

- **Contraception Equity and Women's and Reproductive Health:** In 2000, the DC City Council unanimously passed contraception equity legislation that was strongly supported by DC public health officials. Initially, the law was overturned by Congress. While Congress now permits DC to partially enforce contraception equity laws, Congress **continues to restrict** the way DC uses its own local funds for other issues affecting women's and reproductive health.
- **HIV/AIDS Prevention Programs:** Washington, DC, has the highest AIDS incidence rate of any major city in the U.S. According to the DC Department of Health, injection drug use accounts for 40 percent of HIV/AIDS transmission. Yet, in spite of overwhelming evidence that well-implemented syringe exchange programs are effective in reducing HIV transmission among injection drug users, **Congress prohibits** the District of Columbia from using locally raised funds to support syringe exchange programs.
- **Gun Safety Laws:** For several years, members of the House of Representatives have **promoted legislation repealing DC's gun safety laws** and have even passed the legislation in House. DC law enforcement and other elected officials unanimously oppose the repeal, which, among other negative consequences, would give juveniles and others easy access to purchase, carry and conceal firearms. Members of the House added a rider to DC's FY2006 budget that would have banned the city from enforcing its own gun safety laws. It was removed in conference committee with the understanding that the syringe exchange program prohibition would remain.
- **Tobacco Prevention Programs:** While Congress worked hard to ensure that states were given control to spend their tobacco settlement funds, Congress decided that the District of Columbia **could not use its funds** according to a plan developed by the city and the community for programs like health initiatives, education, or tobacco prevention, until the city's cash reserve was fully funded. More than 7,000 children living in DC today will die prematurely from smoking.
- **Pain Relief for Patients with Terminal Diseases:** Since 1998, Congress has **prohibited implementation of a voter initiative** to legalize doctor-prescribed medical marijuana for AIDS and cancer patients. The initiative was approved by 69 percent of District of Columbia voters.
- **Health Care Benefits Expansion:** In 1992, elected officials of Washington, DC, passed legislation providing for the establishment of domestic partnerships between adults that would provide these couples with the benefits associated with marriage. In 2006, **Congress continues to bar** the District from using funds to implement or enforce the Health Care Benefits Expansion Act.

These are just a few examples.

How can you help? You can educate yourself further on DC's denial of democracy by visiting DC Vote's Web site: www.dcvote.org. Please share this information with your friends and tell your members of Congress to support initiatives that give Americans living in our nation's capital full voting representation in Congress and the right to self-government. Support American democracy for America's capital.