

US plans to ease HIV travel restrictions

Created 21 Dec 2006 - 12:09am

In a statement to mark World AIDS Day, US President George W. Bush has announced an easing of the long-standing rule barring HIV-positive people from travelling to the United States.

The announcement contained only limited information about how the change in policy will be implemented, or when the changes will come into effect. PL understands that President Bush will issue an executive order granting a 'Categorical Waiver' to HIV-positive people entering the US for tourism or business reasons for up to 60 days.

The reference to a 'Categorical Waiver' in the White House statement suggests that it will still be necessary for positive people to declare their HIV status, perhaps at the point of entry to the US, to stay within the law.

"The President considers the participation of people living with HIV/ AIDS a critical element in the global HIV/AIDS response," the White House statement said. "A categorical waiver would enable HIV-positive people to enter the United States for short visits through a streamlined process."

US Global AIDS Coordinator Mark Dybul, in an interview with the San Francisco Chronicle, said the Bush administration is "very serious about fighting discrimination on AIDS."

HIV-positive people have been banned from travel to the US since 1987 under a restriction originally proposed by right-wing fundamentalist Christian senator Jesse Helms. Attempts by President Clinton to repeal the ban were countered by legislation passed in 1993. The ban led to a widespread boycott of the 1990 International AIDS Conference, held in San Francisco; the global meeting has not been held in the US since.

Activists welcomed the decision, calling it a step in the right direction, but argued that it does not go far enough. "We shouldn't have to get a waiver, period," said Eric Sawyer, a co-founder of ACT-UP New York.

Dr Donald Abrams, one of the organisers of the 1990 International AIDS Conference, described the move as "a humane and positive thing," but was uncertain whether it would be enough to bring the International AIDS Conference back to the US.

The current arrangements do permit positive people to travel legally to the US in certain circumstances if they first obtain a waiver, but applications for these waivers are notoriously slow and cumbersome – a personal interview at the US embassy or consulate is required, and the individual's passport must be surrendered while the application is considered, a process often taking several months.

The ban on HIV travel and the difficulty of obtaining a waiver have led many positive people travelling to the US to either risk detection of medications and subsequent deportation, or to take treatment breaks while travelling overseas, possibly with negative health consequences.

- [Travel and immigration](#)