

**Obituaries**

# Shelbia Lengel, who set up national toll-free AIDS hotline, dies at 81

By From staff reports

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Shelbia Lengel, a spokeswoman for the Department of Health and Human Services who was tasked with setting up the government's first national toll-free AIDS hotline, died Aug. 27 at a hospital in Charlottesville. She was 81.

The cause was cancer, said a son, Eric Lengel.

Mrs. Lengel, who also went by Shelley and Shellie, began her federal career as a public information writer for the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare in the 1960s and worked for what became HHS from 1976 to 1988.

The first AIDS cases were identified in 1981, and the death toll rapidly grew into the thousands. Amid the growing AIDS crisis and public confusion about the disease, some municipalities established hotlines to help provide information, counseling and referrals to those with the disease.

The federal government responded in 1983, and Mrs. Lengel was asked to oversee the toll-free help line. A taped message about AIDS ran 24 hours a day, and personnel from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Food and Drug Administration and the National Institutes of Health fielded calls during business hours.

On the first day of operation, phone lines were reportedly swamped by 13,000 callers. Many operators referred callers to another toll-free AIDS hotline staffed by what was then the National Gay Task Force, whose employees could make medical referrals, according to The Washington Post.

Mrs. Lengel later was asked to work on a national public education program to separate rumor from fact and quell what she called "waves of hysteria associated with blood donations and children with AIDS."

Shelbia Jean Looper was born in Albany, Ky., on Dec. 21, 1936, and graduated from a high school in Charleston, W.Va. She received a bachelor's degree in English from Duke University in 1957.

In the early 1970s, she worked for the nascent Environmental Protection Agency, helped organize the first Earth Day and served as executive director of the United Cerebral Palsy Association of Reading, Pa., where she lived at the time.

She was a volunteer for the Whitman-Walker Clinic, an organization in Washington specializing in HIV/AIDS care. She moved to Charlottesville from Arlington, Va., around 2000.

Survivors include her husband of 58 years, Alan Lengel of Charlottesville; two sons, Eric Lengel of Fairfax County, Va., and Ed Lengel of Charlottesville; and five grandchildren. Her son Andy Lengel died of AIDS in 1994.

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