

AIDS Foundation OF CHICAGO

Vote **NO** on H.B. 4306 (Rep. Mary Flowers) Mandated Newborn HIV Testing

The AIDS Foundation of Chicago (AFC) supports universal access to HIV counseling and testing for pregnant women during prenatal care and labor and delivery, when medical interventions have the greatest chance of preventing mother-to-child transmission of HIV.

- **H.B. 4306 is unnecessary.** Illinois has made substantial progress increasing the number of pregnant women and newborns who are tested thanks to the **2003 Perinatal HIV Prevention Act**, which Governor Blagojevich signed into law in 2003. Thanks to the law, as many as 98% of women who give birth in Illinois and/or their newborns receive HIV testing before they leave the hospital, up from 72% just two years ago. Testing a newborn only determines whether his/her mom is HIV-positive as the child is born with his/her mother's immune system. HIV-exposed infants must be retested several months after birth to determine whether the child has actually become infected.
- **The 2003 Perinatal HIV Prevention Act is showing results.** To implement the 2003 law, the Illinois Department of Public Health trained thousands of healthcare workers in each of the state's 132 birthing hospitals and 60 emergency rooms on HIV counseling, rapid HIV testing, and prophylactic medicine. Training was completed just four months ago—in September 2005—and rates of testing continue to increase each month.
- **Mandatory testing is unnecessary.** Studies show that the vast majority of pregnant women (greater than 95%) who are counseled on the benefits of HIV testing for them and their children will accept testing.
- **The provision of high-quality counseling with informed consent to testing engenders a trusting doctor-patient relationship.** HIV-positive women are more likely to remain in care and make the best healthcare decisions for themselves and their children if they are treated with respect and empathy. Conversely, some women harbor deep distrust of government and healthcare systems, which will only harden with forced testing policies.
- **Even with forced testing, newborns will be missed.** About 900 babies are untested each year in New York State, despite its mandatory newborn testing law. Hospital employees are busy. Although they mean well, it's easy to forget a test. By enhancing current strategies and allowing the program to mature, Illinois will voluntarily test almost every pregnant woman.
- **Forced testing can serve as a disincentive to thorough HIV counseling.** More than 99% of pregnant women who are screened will test HIV-negative. Each of these women—more than 100,000 each year—is by definition sexually active, and may become pregnant again in the future. Every effort must be made to provide thorough counseling to these women about HIV and ways to prevent infection. If testing can occur without informed consent, counseling is likely to diminish.

The AIDS Foundation of Chicago (AFC) shares the critical goal of eliminating perinatal HIV in Illinois, and advocated strongly for passage of the 2003 law. For information, contact John Peller at 312-719-6208 or David Munar at 312-922-2322.