AIDS FOUNDATION OF CHICAGO 25 YEARS

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Illinois Advisory Panel Recommends Immediate Waiting List for AIDS Drugs

Advocates Urge Quinn, General Assembly,
Federal Government to Allocate Funding to Avert Public Health Crisis

CHICAGO—Facing an historic budget crisis that could destabilize HIV treatment access for more than 4,000 low-income Illinoisans with HIV/AIDS, a state advisory panel voted on May 21 to urge Illinois to immediately close the AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP) to new applicants and begin a waiting list. The recommendation is now under review by state officials.

"Because the program is deeply underfunded, Illinois must take immediate steps to preserve services for those who rely on ADAP for their life-saving care," said David Ernesto Munar, vice president of the AIDS Foundation of Chicago (AFC), and a member of the ADAP Medical Issues Advisory Board, which made the recommendation. "The program faces total fiscal collapse unless immediate actions are taken."

The Medical Issues Advisory Board, comprised of doctors, pharmacists, legal experts, advocates, and people with HIV, advises the Illinois Department of Public Health on ADAP policy. Jointly funded by the state and federal governments, ADAP provides HIV medications to low-income, HIV-positive Illinoisans who have no other means to afford the costly HIV therapies they need.

"Denying urgent HIV care will only heighten Illinois's already acute HIV crisis and result in greater numbers of preventable HIV deaths and new infections," said AFC President/CEO Mark Ishaug. "We call on Illinois Governor Pat Quinn, the Illinois General Assembly and the federal government to provide immediate assistance to maintain this and other core public health and HIV programs."

"Investing in ADAP is good public health policy and good fiscal policy," said John Peller, AFC's director of government relations. "To close the state's $12 billion budget deficit, state lawmakers should approve fair-minded tax increases. Meeting Illinois's current and future health, education, public safety, child care, and senior needs, depends on an adequately funded public safety net."

The Illinois General Assembly will convene this week in Springfield to finalize the fiscal year 2011 state budget. Governor Quinn's proposed budget would under-fund HIV-related services by more than $4 million.

"The General Assembly and Governor Quinn must act this week to avert ADAP waiting lists by allocating sufficient funding for the program," continued Peller. "For the past decade, Illinois ADAP has been one of the strongest ADAPs in the nation. We urge the state's leaders to uphold their promise that people with HIV in Illinois can get help from the state when they need it the most."

Advocates estimate that an additional $9.68 million in state funding in fiscal year 2011 is needed to avert a waiting list. In April 2010, 4,391 Illinoisans with HIV obtained HIV medications through ADAP, a new record. Each month, more than 100 people join the program.

Without ADAP or adequate insurance, HIV medications are simply too costly to afford for most people. An HIV medication regimen can cost as much as $20,000 per year.

"People of color will be most impacted by a closed program and waiting list," said Rev. Doris Green, AFC director of correctional health and community affairs. "Two out of three people using Illinois ADAP are African American or Latino. People of color are disproportionately impacted by HIV and they tend to be diagnosed at later stages of disease than their white counterparts. An ADAP waiting list will only worsen existing health disparities."

Because of the weak economy, many people with HIV have lost their jobs and are turning to ADAP for help. Thanks to the medications they receive, HIV-positive individuals already on ADAP are living longer and needing uninterrupted services for longer periods of time. Additionally, expanded HIV testing efforts are increasing the number of low-income people who know their HIV-positive status and need medical assistance.

ADAPs across the nation are facing financial crises. Illinois would become the 12th state to institute a waiting list if the advisory panel's recommendation moves forward. More than 1,000 individuals are currently on ADAP waiting lists across the U.S.

"It's a national embarrassment that people with HIV can't get access to the medications that will allow them to work, thrive and contribute to society," said Munar, who is living with HIV. "The United States is failing to meet the most basic need of people with HIV—medications that will extend their lives."

For more information about ADAP and the Illinois state budget crisis, visit www.aidschicago.org/budget.

Founded in 1985 by community activists and physicians, the AIDS Foundation of Chicago is a catalyst for local, national, and international action against HIV/AIDS.
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