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MEDIA CONTACT:

Edwin Emilio Corbin-Gutiérrez
Project Coordinator, Strength in Unity Coalition
Association of Latino Men for Action
o:773-661-0926, f:773-472-6643
edwin@almachicago.org

Silence on Risk for Latinos from AIDS Program Deficit: Over 1,000 Latinos Affected in Illinois

CHICAGO—The lives of almost 1,100 Latinos living with HIV in Illinois could be put in jeopardy if legislators do not expand the state's program to provide lifesaving AIDS medication, the Strength in Unity Coalition told lawmakers at a state public hearing on Friday, January 22, 2010.

The Strength in Unity Coalition is led by the Association of Latino Men for Action—Chicago's gay, bisexual, and questioning Latino men's organization—and includes a diverse set of health and Latino-serving organizations including Latinos Progresando, Corazon Community Services, Salud Latina/Latino Health, and The AIDS Foundation of Chicago. The coalition aims to protect the health and rights of all Latino/as in Illinois, regardless of immigration status or sexual orientation.

The Illinois House Human Services Appropriations Committee hearing convened to address a fiscal crisis facing the Illinois AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP). ADAP is a last-resort program for low-income people with HIV to help them offset the cost of AIDS medications. Health care providers have voiced concern that the program will not meet the increasing demand if legislators do not approve new sources of funding for the program.

If legislators do not approve new sources of funding for ADAP, over 1,000 vulnerable Latinas and Latinos in Illinois will be severely affected. The Latino Policy Forum recently reported that in 2007, Latinos accounted for 27% of the state's uninsured population. Without adequate prescription drug coverage, the cost of the necessary medications to control an HIV infection can devastate the financial security of affected families.

In fact, Latinos comprise 26% of ADAP clients. This is due to the fact that Latinos are the most uninsured group, particularly employer-sponsored health insurance, which means not being able to cover the cost of the medications through other means. But the high percentage of Latino ADAP clients is also due to the high rates of HIV infection among Latino men and women, and high rates of late diagnoses. For Puerto Rican males, HIV/AIDS was one of the ten leading causes of death for Chicago residents in 2006. Furthermore, The Center for Disease Control and Prevention reports that Latinos account for 19% of new HIV diagnoses. Latino gay and bisexual men represent 4 out of every 5 (83%) of new HIV diagnoses within the Latino community in Illinois. However, it is particularly alarming that 43% of new infections take place among gay and bisexual boys and young men ages 13–29. These figures are representative of the disparity in access to sexual health education and HIV prevention services that Latino communities face, particularly when taking into account that the rate of new infections among white males of the same age range and sexual orientation is 25%, almost half. Although often times silenced, it is clear that HIV/AIDS disproportionately affects the entire Latino community. For Latina women, for example, the AIDS case rate per 100,000 is five times that of white women.

Although new initiatives encourage Illinoisans to be tested for HIV, the stigma and the lack of cultural competency in prevention service efforts, including Spanish-language services, result in a late diagnosis for some 42% of Latinos who, as a consequence of late diagnoses, were not able to seek care until very late in the their illness. For many Latinos with HIV, ADAP is the only way to have access to the necessary medications to control the infection, remain productive, and save their lives.

Recognizing the magnitude of this crisis and that it can devastate thousands of Latino families, the Strength in Unity Coalition calls on state leaders to act swiftly to adequately and fairly fund ADAP and other programs

designed to reach the uninsured. Furthermore, it is equally important that culturally competent prevention services be put in place to stop new infections and in that way reduce the number of people that need access to ADAP in the future.

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Strength in Unity is a coalition of non-profit organizations in Illinois advocating for an inclusive Latino/a health and wellness agenda. Strength in Unity partners strive to jointly develop, adopt, and advocate for a health agenda that effectively responds to the needs of diverse Latinos, particularly GLBTQ, immigrants, and youth.