

Response of Governor George W. Bush To the AIDS Foundation of Chicago

Thank you for your recent inquiry concerning my views on HIV/AIDS care and prevention. I appreciate the opportunity to share my views on this vital issue. I hope the United States Conference on AIDS will produce several innovative ideas and strategies to address today's pressing HIV/AIDS-related issues and conquer this horrible disease – replacing despair with hope.

I fervently hope a cure for HIV/AIDS is found, and if elected President I commit to do my part to address this urgent health crisis. First and foremost, my Administration will support significant government-funded research aimed at conquering this disease. I also favor a permanent extension of the Research and Development tax credit for researchers and companies who are currently conducting important research on drugs to combat the spread of HIV. I support the National Institutes of Health continuing their critical HIV/AIDS research and have proposed doubling NIH's budget to propel additional research toward a cure and more effective treatments. Effective prevention campaigns and programs like the Ryan White CARE Act are also effective means to respond effectively and compassionately to people living with HIV and AIDS.

HIV/AIDS is ravaging communities around the world, but infection rates are spiking most dramatically in Africa. The staggering number of deaths every hour of every day of every year affects every corner and every fabric of the African community. It is shocking to hear that the average life expectancy there will soon drop below age 30, down from 70, because of the increasing number of deaths due to AIDS.

It is even more staggering to hear, from the U.S. Census Bureau, that some nations in Africa will experience negative population growth as a result of AIDS. Statistics show that since the AIDS epidemic began, 11.5 million have died of the disease in sub-Saharan Africa alone, accounting for 21 percent of all deaths in the region, with malaria a distant second at 9 percent. More than 33.6 million people around the world are living with AIDS or infected with HIV, and over two-thirds of them, 23.3 million, live in sub-Saharan Africa. About 5,000 people die of AIDS every day, and researchers predict that number will grow to 13,000 by 2010. By comparison, about one-third of one percent of the U.S. population is infected, about 900,000 cases. The African continent lacks adequate resources, both financial and medical, to handle existing cases, much less the projected increase.

The ripples are longer, and sadder, still. A loss of life on this staggering scale, aside from the tragic human impact, also subverts economic growth and promotes instability. This danger is especially strong in countries that are just starting to embrace and build upon economic and political reforms, the very reforms that would facilitate greater access to needed drugs and therapies.

I do not favor needle exchange programs and other so-called "harm reduction" strategies to combat drug use. I support a comprehensive mix of prevention, education, treatment, law enforcement, and supply interdiction to curb drug use and promote a healthy, drug-free America, not misguided efforts to weaken drug laws. Drug use in America, especially among children, has increased dramatically under the Clinton-Gore Administration, and needle exchange programs signal nothing but abdication, that these dangers are here to stay. Children deserve a clear, unmixed message that there are right choices in life and wrong choices in life, that we are all responsible for our actions, and that using drugs will destroy your life. America needs a President who will aim not just for risk reduction, but for risk elimination that offers people hope and recovery, not a dead-end approach that offers despair and addiction. As to medical privacy legislation, I believe that every American should have absolute control over their personal information, particularly their highly sensitive medical, genetic and financial information. As Governor, I enacted several new laws to safeguard the privacy of medical records. We must also recognize the dangers of poor on-line protections. A recent federal government study shows that the Clinton-Gore Administration has failed miserably to meet a fundamental responsibility: protecting Americans' most personal information in this technological age.

Conquering the HIV/AIDS epidemic will be a priority of a Bush White House. Finding a cure, however, is not a goal that one person or even one country can achieve alone. It is a monumental goal for the global community. With an enemy as merciless as this disease, it will take all of our hearts, minds, and strength to find a cure.

Thank you again for giving me the opportunity to discuss my views on these important issues. As the presidential campaign moves forward, I will always welcome your thoughts and ideas.