Freedom Fighter

January 9, 2012 By Regan Hofmann

Congresswoman Barbara Lee (D–Calif.) has been a relentless warrior for people with HIV/AIDS since she first came to Washington, DC, in 1998. Her dedication to the cause is unparalleled in Congress. But it's her willingness to attack the often ugly drivers of the epidemic that distinguishes her in my mind.

Lee broaches the tough issues few want to discuss—the real-life factors that perpetuate the spread of HIV. She speaks up about the need for condoms in prisons and comprehensive sex education in schools. Poverty and how it drives up the rate of HIV infections. The criminalization of people with HIV. Disparities in health care based on the color of your skin. The impact of homelessness on our inability to link people to care and keep them there.

And she doesn't just raise issues—she resolves them. Lee led the charge on the bill that removed the travel ban on people with HIV entering the United States (a large part of why the United States will host the International AIDS Conference this summer). She spearheaded the effort to legalize needle exchange. And on and on.

Sitting in the House gallery and watching her in action, I wonder what inspires a person to repeatedly bring controversial bills to the floor, bills that represent the rights of people who are often disenfranchised and who therefore lack leverage among the people whose decisions determine the fate of their lives.

It's the age-old quandary faced by all in Congress: How do you do the right thing for the people you are representing while managing to keep your largest political donors happy so you can get re-elected? Because you can't help people if you don't get re-elected, but it's harder to get re-elected if you too often help those whose needs may be at odds with those of your wealthiest donors.

Our political system is broken. It doesn't enable our elected representatives on Capitol Hill to have the latitude and length of term to truly effect social change. When the Supreme Court voted in 2010 that corporations can give unlimited funds to members of Congress, it meant that the special interests of the wealthiest donors would drive the political agenda. And those wealthy donors typically are companies that produce things like prescription drugs, oil, financial services, technology and weapons of war. They rarely serve vulnerable populations.

Which is why an ally like Lee is essential to our survival. And why I decided to make sure you all

know who she is. (Read about her on page 24.)

Others on the Hill champion our cause. But few have done as much as Lee. I want to thank Lee for her extraordinary leadership on HIV/AIDS. If you would like to thank her too, visit her website at lee.house.gov and send her a note.

One of the best insurance policies we can have for our health is to ensure that those who represent us on the Hill speak truth to power and fight for our freedom from HIV. Congresswoman Lee does both, beautifully.

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