The Other Way to End AIDS

The executive director of the AIDS Policy Project on the Cure for AIDS Act.

February 6, 2013 By Kate Krauss

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If you could raise $100 million for AIDS cure research—just for the cure—would you do it?

The Cure for AIDS Act was introduced into Congress last summer by a former banker from Connecticut.

Rep. Jim Himes (D–Conn.), formerly of Goldman Sachs, is a member of the House Financial Services Committee. He's also the child of a one-time UNICEF official, and he cares deeply about stopping the AIDS pandemic.

He did the math: The United States is spending $19 billion on care and treatment for people with AIDS every year but a bit over $50 million to try to cure the disease—still only about 3 percent of the AIDS research budget of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). He knew the research was going well—so why weren't we pushing to find a cure as quickly as possible? Because more money means that a lot of things can happen simultaneously. It can mean speed.

So last July, with little fanfare, Rep. Himes introduced the Cure for AIDS Act.

If the bill passed, $100 million over five years would actually go into the military's AIDS research budget, a new source of cure research funding, where scientists and community advocates would help decide how it is spent. The Cure for AIDS Act attracted some important cosponsors, but ran out of time before it could get much traction.

We're in a new legislative year now. Congress is in session. And we have another chance to support this bill and push to get it passed.

The money is badly needed. Only the slimmest fraction of cure proposals are funded at the NIH—so that many researchers must wait years to get together the money needed to fund their work. And this doesn't even include young researchers—or the scientists from other fields we'd love to pull into cure research for their innovative ideas. NIH funding for a cure is a flat $54 million. After all, you don't need rocket fuel to pedal a bicycle. But we want something big, that moves fast. We want to build a rocket.

The Cure for AIDS Act requires a big, bipartisan group of cosponsors with enough firepower to get it through Congress and into an appropriations bill where it can make it into law. Last week, a group of activists in Los Angeles took an important step and convinced a new cosponsor, Rep. Henry Waxman

(D–Calif.), to sign on. We are talking to other legislators to cosponsor the bill as well.

Certainly, the cure for AIDS is a bipartisan issue. In fact, the idea for the AIDS Policy Project cure campaign came from something that Rick Warren, an evangelical Christian minister, said to an AIDS activist in 2009: "Why aren't we working on a cure for AIDS? That's what we need!"

Well, we're working on it now. And we need your help. We all want a cure. And together we can do it.

We must call on our Congressional representatives to cosponsor this bill. And we must thank its early cosponsors—Rep. Barbara Lee (D–Calif.), Rep. Frederica Wilson (D–Fla.), Rep. Kathy Castor (D–Fla.) and Rep. Alcee Hastings (D–Fla.)—and show them that we support it.

And we also have to push for a cure in other ways—by spreading the word about this campaign. By encouraging private funding cure research: Right now, only one private foundation, amfAR, funds AIDS cure research. And frankly, by funding and supporting AIDS cure advocacy to make sure that the job gets done.

There is much work ahead of us. But wow—what an opportunity. A cure could save millions of lives, now and in the future.

And to Jim Himes, the former banker in Connecticut, we say: Thank you.

Watch Rep. Himes talk about AIDS:

To sign up as a volunteer if you haven't already, click here.

For the text of the Cure for AIDS Act, click here.

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