Putting Ourselves to the Test: Achieving Equity to End HIV

The U.S. government theme for World AIDS Day 2022 emphasizes accountability and action.

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Each year on December 1st, we commemorate World AIDS Day. This important awareness day remains a time to reflect on our worldwide response to HIV/AIDS while honoring the lives of those lost to AIDS-related illnesses. On this day, we also renew our commitment to supporting the wellbeing of those with HIV, as well as those at risk for infection.

The U.S. Government (USG) theme for World AIDS Day 2022—Putting Ourselves to the Test: Achieving Equity to End HIV—emphasizes accountability and action, affirming the Biden-Harris Administration's dedication to ending HIV, both in the United States and around the globe, through an approach that centers on communities disproportionately affected by the pandemic. This year, we observe World AIDS Day in the context of two other infectious disease threats—COVID-19 and monkeypox—which have heavily impacted many of those same communities. These epidemics have further highlighted that our public health response to HIV will require us to address health disparities holistically.

The theme also highlights the importance of HIV testing. "Everyone should get tested for HIV and know their status. We are advancing a status-neutral approach to HIV testing that puts equity at the forefront. Under this approach, no matter what the outcome of the test, people should be connected with the necessary HIV prevention and treatment services, including strategies to address social determinants of health and barriers to access," said Kaye Hayes, HHS Deputy Assistant Secretary for Infectious Disease and the Director of the Office of Infectious Disease and HIV/AIDS Policy.

We have made remarkable strides since the first World AIDS Day commemoration 34 years ago. Scientific research has yielded innovations in HIV care, treatment, and prevention so that individuals with HIV can enjoy longer, healthier lives. Robust scientific studies have also shown that people who are on HIV medication and achieve and maintain viral suppression cannot spread HIV to others, which means that successful treatment further drives down new transmissions. These advances have been possible due to strategic collaborations between governments, public-sector partners, multilateral institutions, nongovernment and philanthropic organizations, private companies, and research institutions. People with HIV have been central to this progress, and community-based organizations working in areas most affected by HIV are at the forefront of ensuring that the advances we have made translate into real improvements in the health and lives of the people they serve.

Yet despite our tremendous progress, our work is not finished. Globally, there are approximately 1.5 million new cases of HIV every year, including over 35,000 new infections in the United States. Due to stigma, discrimination, and other structural factors, certain populations and geographic areas continue to bear most of the burden of this disease. We remain deeply committed to ending HIV everywhere by engaging and empowering communities, and by ensuring that our programs, research, and policies are informed by the voices of those populations most impacted by HIV.

Globally, the U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) is the largest commitment by any nation to address a single disease in history. Led by the U.S. Department of State in

collaboration with seven other USG partner agencies, PEPFAR has worked for the past 19 years with more than 50 countries across the globe to address HIV/AIDS. In collaboration with partnerships across multiple sectors, PEPFAR's programs have saved more than 21 million lives, prevented millions of HIV infections, and helped countries build a strong foundation to prevent, detect, and respond to other health threats, including COVID-19. "The greatest public health asset and the greatest public health response is PEPFAR. Through collaboration and partnership, we have made considerable progress toward ending the HIV/AIDS pandemic, but the last mile of the response is the greatest challenge. We are working with our multisectoral partners to focus on areas where gaps still exist among key and vulnerable populations to end HIV/AIDS as a public health threat by 2030," said Ambassador Dr. John Nkengasong, U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator and Special Representative for Health Diplomacy, who leads PEPFAR.

Here in the United States, the Ending the HIV Epidemic in the U.S. (EHE) initiative continues to provide a bold vision for dramatically reducing the number of new HIV cases over the next several years, while the updated National HIV/AIDS Strategy (NHAS), released by President Biden during World AIDS Day last year, provides stakeholders across the nation with a complementary framework for addressing HIV among the populations and communities most impacted. The NHAS Federal Implementation Plan, released in August 2022, outlines specific actions and activities that various federal agencies will take to achieve the goals set forth in the Strategy.

"This World AIDS Day, we acknowledge the role equity plays in either the success or failure of our Nation's HIV response. Providing equitable access to HIV testing, prevention, care, treatment, and research is key to ending the HIV epidemic," said Harold Phillips, Director of the White House Office of National AIDS Policy. "The COVID-19 pandemic has tested our resolve and our ability to focus on ending the HIV epidemic. This World AIDS Day, we must recommit and re-energize all sectors of society to center equity within our HIV response by ensuring that everyone with HIV and those at-risk for infection have access to appropriate HIV testing, treatment, and prevention services. We encourage everyone to get an HIV test and to help us combat HIV-related stigma. As we work to implement the National HIV AIDS Strategy, this year's theme reminds us that the time has come to act, and for all of us to put ourselves to the test of ending HIV."

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