Senate Reauthorizes PEPFAR

July 17, 2008

On July 16, the U.S. Senate voted to triple funding for the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), which would allocate $50 billion to prevent and treat HIV/AIDS around the world, the Associated Press reports (ap.google.com). The bill now moves back to the House of Representatives for a final vote before President George W. Bush signs it into law.

The reauthorization bill overcame opposition from conservative Senators who wanted assurances that the plan would continue to include programs promoting abstinence as a preferred means of HIV prevention. On July 15, an overwhelming number of bipartisan Senators voted against a Republican-introduced amendment that would have kept PEPFAR funding at $15 billion, its original five-year budget that expires in September.

According to the AP, Sen. Tom Coburn, (R-Okla.) secured language in the reauthorization bill that would ensure that more than half of the $50 billion would be set aside specifically for HIV treatment.

Coburn told the AP, "This is our most successful foreign policy initiative in my lifetime. This is the most effective thing we have done to build America's prestige, esteem and respect."

In addition, the bill includes a measure—added by Sens. John Kerry, (D-Mass.) and Gordon Smith (R-Ore.)—that would lift U.S. restrictions on visiting HIV-positive foreigners.

"For 20 years, the United States has barred HIV-positive travelers from entering the country even for one day," said Rachel B. Tiven, executive director of advocacy group Immigration Equality. "Today the Senate said loud and clear that AIDS exceptionalism must come to an end."

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