A Platform to End AIDS: Testimony Delivered to the DNC Platform Committee

August 9, 2012 By David Ernesto Munar

I had the pleasure of testifying before the Democratic National Committee Platform Committee on Saturday, July 28 in Minneapolis. I provided testimony as a private citizen and person living with HIV. My prepared remarks follow below.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning. I am a proud Chicagoan, Colombian?American, gay man, and since 1994, a person living with HIV. I had the honor to serve as a delegate to our party's nominating conventions in 2004 and 2008.

My entire professional career has been devoted to advancing the fight against AIDS. I currently serve as the President/CEO of the AIDS Foundation of Chicago. I spent this week at the 19th International AIDS Conference in Washington, DC with thousands of scientists, researchers, activists, and officials from around the world taking stock of progress made and milestones yet to be won.

After the week's proceedings, I could not be prouder of our nation and party leadership. This week, we heard unequivocal support from Democratic leaders such as President Bill Clinton, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Leader Nancy Pelosi, Congresswoman Barbara Lee, and other senior officials that pursuit of an AIDS?free generation is the official policy of the United States government.

President Obama hosted conference organizers and activists on Thursday at the White House. He reiterated his optimism and determination to usher an end to the AIDS crisis.

While we still lack a vaccine and cure, U.S.?led research has transformed the landscape of HIV/AIDS for those with access to the powerful medications that are literally life extending. With proper adherence, the medications can render an HIV?positive person virtually un?infectious. The medications are now even part of our prevention strategies to help HIV?negative individuals avoid infection. And U.S. led research is rapidly pursuing novel ways to eradicate HIV from those infected and support long?term resistance or suppression.

I have to admit I was not always optimist. In 1994, the year I was diagnosed with HIV, there were

no effective treatments. Approximately 40,000 Americans died of AIDS in 94; 50,000 the following year. I was 25 years old.

Though combination HIV treatment debuted in 1996, I was initially reluctant. I feared the medications would not be effective or that they would result in scarring and stigmatizing side effects. And for years I was not ready to confront, on a daily basis, the realities of living with HIV. But as time passed, I started to feel the effects of the virus. I grew increasingly susceptible to persistent colds and infections that easily became severe. My energy waned.

I started treatment in 2004 and have maintained an undetectable viral load ever since, which means the virus in my body is maximally suppressed. But equally importantly, my energy and vitality vastly improved.

I'm happy to say that today I'm healthier than ever. Since starting treatment, I've completed 10 marathons and continue training. Such exertion would be unthinkable before. When I was diagnosed, I had not expected to live pass age 35, which I reached and surpassed.

But I'm also very lucky. I'm educated, employed and have health insurance. I've not struggled with homelessness or addiction. I found supportive friends and family and, in my position, have access to a wealth of information. I've not been bullied for being gay or faced life behind bars. Indeed, I've not faced the barriers my clients at the AIDS Foundation of Chicago must confront every day.

The HIV epidemic in the U.S. disproportionately affects African Americans and Latinos, especially in low?income and marginalized communities. Gay men of all races/ethnicities remain most affected, followed by African-American heterosexual women.

Of the estimated 1.2 million Americans living with HIV, less than one?third are virally suppressed. Deplorably, less than half of all people diagnosed with HIV receive continuous clinical care and treatments needed to extend their lives and slow transmission. Another 250,000 are estimated to be unaware of their HIV?positive status. Lacking knowledge of their infection, these individuals risk serious health complications and inadvertent transmission to others.

This is why the Obama Administration worked closely with experts and advocates to create the first?ever National HIV/AIDS Strategy. Released in 2010, it is a five?year roadmap to achieve better results in the AIDS fight in the U.S. It's an incredible plan that unfortunately has made only incremental progress. To achieve the targets in the Obama Administration's National HIV/AIDS Strategy will require substantial new investments, particularly for prevention.

To help close the HIV treatment gaps, the Affordable Care Act could not be more important. Lack of healthcare access is a fundamental driver of the epidemic and the U.S. must do all it can to help people with HIV/AIDS gain access to high quality healthcare so they can benefit from the full array of state-of-the-art HIV treatments. It's not only humanitarian but also cost?savings. Every infection averted saves $300,000 in average lifetime healthcare costs.

U.S. leadership on AIDS is not limited to our borders. American generosity has saved millions of lives in the developing world and motivated critically important investments in HIV prevention and care by international donors and affected nations. Our party can be proud of the diplomacy and safety it is securing around the world with the lifesaving activities of the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief and the Global Fund for AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

In Charlotte, the Democratic Party must stand behind its leaders and back up their soaring rhetoric with firm commitments of action. The DNC platform should unequivocally support science and redouble commitments to domestic and international initiatives to make progress against HIV/AIDS at home and abroad. The platform must also commit to concrete steps to achieve an AIDS?free generation.

Leader Pelosi said, in closing the international conference yesterday, that the U.S. has a morale imperative to avail HIV healthcare and preventive services for all those who need them. The U.S. has a morale imperative to fight debilitating HIV stigma and discrimination, she said. Today I hope this committee will adopt bold anti?AIDS positions in its platform to begin to fulfill these and other historic promises.

I respectfully submit the following detailed recommendations for your consideration. Thank you.

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