Bringing the AIDS Fight Home

November 30, 2011 By David Ernesto Munar

This is an open letter to President Barack Obama and the World AIDS Day panelists, including President George W. Bush, President Bill Clinton, Tanzanian President Jakaya Kikwete, California Rep. Barbara Lee, Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, Bono and Alicia Keys. The historic discussion will take place on World AIDS Day, Dec. 1, at George Washington University, and can be viewed from the (RED) website.

November 30, 2011

The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President and distinguished World AIDS Day panelists,

Thank you for agreeing to sit down at the table on this historic World AIDS Day and renewing your commitment to bringing an end to the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Reflecting on 2011, we expect this year to be known as the moment that finally put to rest the treatment v. prevention debate. As we all surely know now -- treatment is prevention.

Looking to the future, it's time to retire another worn-out dichotomy: the global v. domestic response to AIDS. We need a unified commitment and a detailed plan for fighting the epidemic at home and abroad, vigorously working toward the AIDS-free generation so eloquently envisioned by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton last month.

We raise this point because we worry this World AIDS Day panel will focus largely on international issues. As you know, there are still over 1 million people in the United States with HIV. In several states, waiting lists for drug assistance are growing. Budgets are being cut.

Now is the time to recommit ourselves to the fight against AIDS here at home, or risk gains made in the past 30 years. Now is the time to articulate concrete steps the United States will take to make the bold vision of an AIDS-free generation a reality.

President Obama, you gave us hope with your unveiling of the National HIV/AIDS Strategy last year, the first of its kind. But now we need you to push this plan forward with detailed action. How

will we fulfill its promise?

As you know, this is urgent. Between 2006 and 2009, the number of HIV infections among young gay/bisexual African-American men increased almost 50 percent -- the highest incidence increase of any at-risk group, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

President Bush, it was you who marshaled national resources for the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). The significance of that cannot be overstated. We must scale up the program in order to meet the United Nations goal of treating 15 million people worldwide by 2015.

And we must also ask ourselves, what have we learned from PEPFAR that we can use to address the epidemic domestically?

President Clinton, when you addressed delegates at the International AIDS Conference in Mexico City in 2008, you vowed to broaden the focus of the William J. Clinton Foundation's HIV/AIDS Initiative to also target AIDS in America. This came on the heels of CDC data showing a 40 percent increase in HIV infections in the United States.

Respectfully, we have seen too little come of your pledge. No one can question your foundation's commitment to HIV/AIDS globally, but it is time to bring the fight home.

Sen. Marco Rubio, as you well know, over 3,000 people in your state of Florida are currently on the AIDS Drug Assistance Program waiting list. We hope you're committed to changing that by fighting to provide those people with access to affordable medication.

Rep. Barbara Lee, you have been a lionhearted advocate for HIV/AIDS in this country. You were instrumental in eliminating the HIV travel and immigration ban and bringing the International AIDS Conference to Washington, D.C., in July. Please continue leading us in this fight, globally and at home.

And Bono, we commend you for your work through ONE and (RED). We hope you'll continue to use your celebrity to broker discourse on HIV/AIDS everywhere it resides, including the United States.

To all of you, we thank you for your passion and commitment.

With a greater allocation of resources for HIV prevention, care and treatment to meet the National HIV/AIDS Strategy targets, stalwart defense of the Affordable Care Act, and a renewed federal commitment to the Medicaid program, we can make enormous progress against HIV/AIDS.

Ending HIV/AIDS is a moral and humanitarian endeavor that matches our commitment to curb unnecessary future healthcare expenditures and increase our nation's productivity.

Let us stir our citizens to action! A reinvigorated and well-informed American public is necessary to ending AIDS globally and at home in the United States.

On this World AIDS Day, we implore you to pledge greater attention and support to move forward on efforts to end the AIDS epidemic worldwide.

Striving for an end to AIDS domestically is as important as our nation's commitments to rid the world of AIDS globally through an expanded commitment to PEPFAR; the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Malaria, and Tuberculosis; and comprehensive prevention and treatment efforts.

We urge you to make a bold announcement about our nation's ability to begin to end this epidemic in our country, our communities and our world.

Respectfully yours,

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President/CEO of the AIDS Foundation of Chicago

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