Largest HIV funding cut in Illinois history is likely to result in new HIV cases, fuel AIDS epidemic

June 1, 2012 By David Ernesto Munar

SPRINGFIELD, IL - In a devastating blow to statewide efforts to curb the AIDS epidemic, the Illinois General Assembly enacted a state budget on Thursday, May 31 that slashes funding for community-based HIV prevention, care and housing programs by 42%.

The funding cuts will take effect with the state budget that begins July 1, 2012. Despite the best efforts of HIV advocates and some legislators, more than 100 additional people are likely to be newly infected with HIV in the coming year because of the funding cuts (a 10% increase in new HIV infections), according to projections by the AIDS Foundation of Chicago (AFC). The lifetime medical costs for those individuals will exceed $40 million, a financial burden that casts a pall on the few bright spot of the past legislative session, said David Ernesto Munar, AFC President/CEO.

“The General Assembly set back the progress against AIDS by a decade,” Munar said. “Just when we are starting to see new HIV cases decline, Illinois has turned its back on people with HIV and people at risk of HIV.”

“If the state wants to save money,” continued Munar, “cutting HIV services is the absolutely worst strategy. HIV funding cuts are a bad deal for the taxpayers of Illinois and a tragedy for people who will have to live with a still-deadly infectious disease that could have been prevented.”

If not for last-minutes efforts by supportive legislators, the cuts could have been much worse. Late on May 30, the House Human Services Appropriations Committee, led by State Rep. Sara Feigenholtz (D-Chicago), restored $623,000, reducing the HIV funding cuts to $3.3 million.

“We are thankful that Rep. Feigenholtz and members of the committee were able to partially restore some HIV funding,” said Ramon Gardenhire, AFC’s Director of Government Relations.

Gardenhire also applauded the leadership of State Rep. Rita Mayfield (D-Waukegan), who spearheaded efforts by the Black Caucus to reject cuts to HIV programs.

“African Americans will be disproportionately affected by these cuts,” he said.

Gov. Pat Quinn proposed a $4 million reduction in HIV funding when he released his budget proposal in February. Since then, AFC has led vigorous community advocacy to reverse the proposed cuts.

“We applaud everyone who answered the call and who pushed back against these devastating cuts, by sending emails, visiting legislators in person, and signing petitions,” Gardenhire noted. “However to see a budget that reflects the needs of most Illinoisans, we need the entire community to stand up and push back against these harmful cuts in the future.”

Advocacy efforts saw mixed results. The Illinois Senate rejected the Governor’s proposed cut and funded HIV services at 2012 levels, thanks to leadership from State Sen. Heather Steans (D-Chicago), who chairs the Senate Appropriations Committee. However, the Senate-passed budget was dead on arrival in the opposite chamber.

In a significant bright note for HIV funding, the General Assembly approved legislation that would allow Cook County to implement a proposed Medicaid 1115 waiver. The waiver would expand Medicaid coverage to at least 100,000 low-income, uninsured Cook County residents, including people with HIV.

“If the federal government approves the waiver, over 1,000 people with HIV will gain Medicaid coverage and won’t need state assistance to obtain HIV medications,” said John Peller, Vice President of Policy. “This savings must be directed to community-based HIV prevention, care and housing programs.”

“Rep. Feigenholtz established a special account in the state treasury to protect savings from the waiver and preserve it for HIV prevention programs,” Peller continued. “We don’t yet know how quickly the savings will materialize, and the General Assembly will have to pass legislation to redirect the savings. We will work vigorously to make sure money is directed to AIDS-affected communities as quickly as possible.”

However, in an attempt to force the House to raise funding levels, the Senate late on May 31 refused to approve the bill that included the special waiver savings account. This must-pass legislation includes provisions needed to implement the budget. The Senate’s move pushes the General Assembly into overtime, when a bipartisan super-majority is required to advance legislation. Around the Capitol, lawmakers and state workers remained unclear how the standoff will be resolved.

The General Assembly could have avoided HIV funding cuts by reducing corporate tax loopholes and taking other steps to increase revenue, but failed to act, Munar said.

“At a time when Medicaid, healthcare programs and HIV services are being dramatically reduced, the General Assembly made sweetheart deals to Fortune 500 companies in the form of sizeable tax breaks. It’s a shameful reality and sign of misplaced priorities,” Munar said.

To learn more about the state budget and Medicaid changes and how it will impact you and AIDS organizations, click here to register for our End of Session webinar on Friday, June 8th at 12:00 pm with Rep. Greg Harris (D-Chicago) and Ann Fisher, Executive Director, AIDS Legal Council of Chicago.

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