$60 Million New Dollars For ADAP and the Repeal of DADT (Or, How Senator Harkin Becomes Our Hero)

December 12, 2010 By Regan Hofmann

Last night, while pounding along the frozen back roads of the rural farmland where I live under the light of a new moon (no promises to my friends who know who you are but I am running!), I passed a little house set back in the woods, ablaze with many strands of Christmas lights.

There was something about the way it brightly sparkled in an otherwise gray stretch of woods that made me smile though my lips were frozen from the winter wind. And suddenly, it felt like the holidays. I've been so crazed lately that I nearly forgot it 'tis the season.

I love the holidays because even though I'm all stressed out trying to fight the AIDS pandemic and worried about the North Koreans and the many people I know who are looking for jobs and others who are struggling financially, all it takes is glittering tinsel, a whiff of evergreen and the sight of a little house proudly glowing in the gloaming to make me realize we made it through another year, we get to turn the corner and start fresh on a new year soon, and somehow, though we all have our worries, it may all be better in days to come.

This time of year summons the irrepressible joy that lurks somewhere even in the darkest and most beat down of hearts. Nothing is stopping us from hanging our lights and turning up the radio when the carols come on. And even if we're blue or scared or worried, if we tap into the communal holiday spirit, we can feel the love. And we all know that we get more the more we give. And when we we give together to help others, we receive exponentially.

I am halfway ready. I have a hot pink faux Christmas tree...and have wrapped the boxwoods in twinkling nets of lights. Garlands drape over the mirrors in the house and there's a big red bow on the front door. I haven't sent the cards, or finished shopping, but there's still time.

For those things.

But we have no time, maybe a day, maybe two, to help the holidays come early to thousands of Americans (4,369 in 9 states and counting) who are living with HIV and who are on AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP) wait lists.

On Friday, the U.S. House of Representatives approved an additional $60 million…yes $60 MILLION…for ADAPs. (Rumor has it and I'm checking it out that Speaker Pelosi's office may have taken the lead on proposing this lifesaving funding for HIV positive people.)

This week, the FY 2011 Continuing Resolution (that contains the request for the additional ADAP funds) goes to the Senate where it has a few days, and maybe as few as one or two, to get approved in the last days of the lame-duck session of the 111th Congress. There may be alternate versions of the Continuing Resolution presented but all that matters is that the HIV community and our friends holler to the Hill that we need that additional $60 million dollars of ADAP money in whatever version of Continuing Resolution or Omnibus gets presented for votes.

So, here's how you can give a gift to the HIV community. Please put down the garland. The lights can wait. Your friends will still love you if they get your holiday card in the new year.

I need you to focus for a day, maybe two, on calling, and calling and calling the people who work for us on Capitol Hill and politely asking, or demanding, whatever suits your style best, that the FY 2011 federal budget include $60 million dollars of incremental ADAP funding.

It's really easy to have some pretty serious impact. If we make the Senator's phones ring off the hook, their staffs will pay attention and the Senators may care. Many may not know how critical the funding is to the lives of ourselves and our fellow community members and some may not care because they don't understand. But we can educate them, and by doing so, perhaps make them sympathetic to our cause.

We have a severe need for this emergency funding or people could get sick and die. Because of the recession, many people living with HIV have lost their jobs and health insurance and so ADAPs have become overloaded with new need. Federal funding has not kept pace with the need and many of the states have severely cut their budgets. ADAPs provide HIV-related medication to under insured or uninsured people living with HIV/AIDS in the U.S. The number of people served by ADAPs, which are part of the Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program, represents, according to the AIDS Institute, about 25%--one quarter--of all people estimated to be receiving care in the U.S. for HIV/AIDS.

There is another related issue also being considered by the Senate: the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell. Even if you are not a gay rights activist, you may want to consider advocating for the repeal of DADT while you're asking for additional funds for ADAPs. Why? Well, first, because any man or woman who volunteers to provide military service and to risk their life to protect their fellow Americans should not have their sexual orientation questioned, period. Second, (back to the North Koreans), we are in a delicate global political climate and we should not be keeping able-bodied and able-minded people out of our military when we very well might, God forbid, need them. (Because you can bet if we ever got caught short-handed for military personnel and we started a draft, DADT would be repealed in a nanosecond.) And third, because it is against the American constitution to discriminate and DADT does exactly that. How can we be a beacon of freedom and equality if we don't practice what we preach? And finally, we should support the repeal of DADT

because all people who face stigma and discrimination of any kind should stick together. And Lord knows people with HIV/AIDS face both. So I say gay and straight, bisexual and transgender people living with HIV/AIDS should stand in solidarity with all gay, bisexual and transgender men and woman to protect their rights. The broader the spectrum of protection for the human rights of all people, the more we will all benefit.

So here's what you do:

Get your phone.

Dial 202.224.3121

Tell the operator which state you're from. Ask the operator for the names, numbers and/or emails of your two state Senators. Write them down.

Then, write down this number: 202.224.9145. It's the number for Senator Tom Harkin's office. Senator Harkin is Chairman of the Senate Labor HHS Appropriations Subcommittee. He is critical to getting ADAP funding included in whatever version of the Continuing Resolution is presented to the Senate.

Now, call or email each of your Senators and Senator Harkin, and say the following:

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Hello, my name is (your name).

I am calling from (say your state if your calling your state Senators) and/or I am calling on behalf of the HIV community (for example, if you're calling Senator Harkin and are not from Iowa).

(and/or, if you wish)

I am a person living with HIV.

Please tell the Senator that there are two urgent items that the Senate must act on before the holiday adjournment. I will be watching the Senator's action on these items very carefully and sharing my thoughts with many constituents.

The first is the incremental $60 million of funding for the AIDS Drug Assistance Program provided in the House's version of the Continuing Resolution This money is essential as it will allow states to provide medication to people living with HIV who cannot currently afford treatment. If these people do not receive this treatment, their health could quickly deteriorate and their lives could be at risk. Currently, 4,369 Americans in 9 states can not get the treatment they need. The incremental $60 million must be preserved in either in a Continuing Resolution or in an Omnibus.

Second, the House passed legislation to repeal Don't Ask Don't Tell. Last week, the Senate failed to reach closure on this item. The military chain of command, including the Secretary of Defense, Admiral Mullen is advocating repeal. Last week's report indicated no damage to readiness if a repeal is accomplished. Discharging gays in critical roles is bad for our national security. Discriminating against men and women

brave enough to serve their nation in uniform because of their sexual orientation is Un-American. The Senate must act on the repeal of DADT.

Thank you.

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Then, if you make these calls, come back to my blog and 1) post a comment saying you did it and 2) tell us what happened.

There are 420 minutes in a work day. If 420 of you called Senator Harkin's office, the calls would average one per minute. There are only 100 Senators from 50 states. So, identify 5 friends in your state and send them a link to this blog and see if they will call, and send it on to five more friends each. Have a list serve? An e-newsletter? Send out the link to this blog. I'd love the community to make some real noise. Have an idea about how we can get this to more people? Post a comment on my blog and we'll see if we can do it. Can I get 1,000 of you to call? 5,000? Our audience is hundreds of thousands. You all have friends and family...let's test drive what we as a community can to. Imagine...

Let's show Capitol Hill that people with HIV are paying attention, ready to mobilize and mad as hell that Americans with HIV and our gay brothers and sisters are getting treated poorly.

Things will only change if we do something about it.

As Ghandi said, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world."

So dial for dollars, then get back to your holiday fun knowing that you have done two things to protect your fellow Americans, and possibly, yourself.

Here's hoping Senator Harkin's heart and those of the other Senators are filled with holiday joy and compassion. (Quick! Someone get Senator Harkin under the mistletoe! That will put him in the holiday spirit! And while he's there, point out how much money will be saved by investing in care for people living with HIV now. Treatment can help avoid serious, costly HIV-related illness--because people don't die from HIV but rather the diseases that are caused when HIV destroys the immune system--while minimizing additional cases of HIV. And, of course, treatment spares lives. Oh, yes, and I'd also point out that it would be a pretty big indictment of our medical system and our country's commitment to the health of its citizens if thousands of Americans were dying in hospitals that had the medicines to keep them alive if only we could make them affordable.)

If the $60 million and the repeal of DADT make it through the Senate before the holidays I'll let you know and we can use this same procedure to send our gratitude up to the Hill. How cool would it be to be making thank you calls later this week?

Are ya with me?

Let's go.

'Tis the season to save some lives.

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