Doing it for the Dead

December 1, 2012 By Regan Hofmann

Today, December 1, is World AIDS Day 2012. It's always a bittersweet occasion. Each time I mark another World AIDS Day, I'm so happy to still be here and am deeply grateful for the progress that's been made in the last year. But it's a tough day as we remember all we've lost to AIDS and contemplate how our own lives have been impacted.

I deal with loss in the past by doing everything I can in the present to make the future as bright as can be.

This year, the future looks more hopeful for people at risk for and living with HIV than ever. Science shows that an AIDS-free generation is viable with the tools and knowledge in our hands and heads today. And political and global leaders are rallying around the notion of the end of AIDS in a way that makes the dream of an AIDS-free world a real possibility. The hunt for the cure is heating up, the pursuit of vaccines rages on and there is new HIV-savvy leadership in key places like the World Bank (Jim Kim!) and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (Mark Dybul!)--two key organizations capable of getting prevention and treatment to many more in need. UNAIDS continues to push for zero new infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS-related deaths. Michel Sidibe, UNAIDS' executive director, continues to do a superb job articulating the extraordinary chance we have to stave off mass suffering and death if only we agree to a more equitable distribution of resources to people threatened by HIV. The 2012 UNAIDS report documents that more nations that ever are contributing to the battle against AIDS. And with Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma (an experienced diplomat who is the former wife of South African President Jacob Zuma) at the helm of the African Union, there is even more hope for greater country engagement--especially when science and real-world case studies show that investing in the end of AIDS yields notable dividends.

And, finally, on Thursday, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton unveiled the "President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) Blueprint: Creating an AIDS-free Generation." I've written about it in detail in a piece that will soon be posted on the Huffington Post so I'll just touch briefly on it here. It's a tremendously good roadmap. It's proof positive that we can end AIDS, offers modeling for how it's being done in four nations and, by removing the question of whether we can control viral spread, heightens the moral imperative for those with the power to end AIDS to do so. Its implementation will require the support of many nations (including ours) as well as that of the multilateral funds like the Global Fund and World Bank. Securing the financial resources to achieve an AIDS-free generation will require some serious advocacy around the world. But I believe the existence of the Blueprint will be a helpful tool for that advocacy.

It’s no small thing for Secretary Clinton to endorse the Blueprint. Her support suggests to me that she believes so thoroughly in the world’s ability to end AIDS that she wants to leave--as part of her legacy at the State Department--evidence that AIDS can be beaten so that the next set of leaders there feel the pressure to continue the U.S. commitment to the end of AIDS. There are many sticky, tricky, expensive global challenges. But when someone maps a way to solve them, it makes it more problematic for them to remain unsolved. “We didn’t know how” is an excuse no one can use anymore for failing to end AIDS. The PEPFAR Blueprint is inherently invaluable unless it is implemented. But the fact that it exists and is endorsed by Secretary Clinton and the White House increases the chances it may serve as a user’s manual for the AIDS endgame.

The PEPFAR Blueprint compellingly demonstrates how front-loaded strategic investments based on sound science can achieve an AIDS-free generation in the not-so-distant-future. And that such investments will result in significant savings--in terms of both dollars and lives--in days to come.

Here is Secretary Clinton, at the unveiling of the PEPFAR Blueprint:

Given that this World AIDS Day marks a moment of great opportunity to seize the ability we have to end AIDS, I thought I’d offer up a Whitman’s Sampler of sorts of 12 tangible things I feel can

help free the word from HIV (there are 12 because it's World AIDS Day 2012). They are listed in no particular order. Please add your own suggestions in the comments section!

1. **Call for bi-partisan support of H.R. 6187 "The Cure for AIDS Act**

While better prevention and more access to care for more people will lead to an AIDS-free generation, an AIDS-free world is impossible without a cure. This bill would fund research for and development of an AIDS cure by establishing a $100 million research program within the Congressionally Directed Medical Research Program managed by the Department of Defense. The department would work closely with academic researchers and nonprofit orgs to create a consortium of scientists and advocates to review cure research proposals. The bill was dropped by Congressman Jim Himes (D-CT) and co-sponsored by Congresswoman Barbara Lee (D-CA).

ACTION: Help push to get the remaining two co-chairs of the Congressional HIV/AIDS Caucus--Congressman Jim McDermott (D-WA) and Congressman Trent Franks (R-AZ)--on the bill as co-sponsors. Tweet: "Congressmen @RepJimMcDermott & @RepTrentFranks co-sponsor "The Cure for AIDS Act" HR 6187 to bring #endofaids." And email and call their offices! (And the offices of your representatives to ask them to join, too.) To find contact info for members of Congress: click here. McDermott's DC office # is 202.225.3106. Franks DC office # is 202.225.4576. Ending AIDS requires bipartisan support. And, a cure.

2. **Thank those leading the fight.**

As important as it is to push and advocate for change with those who oppose us, it's equally important to offer encouragement and thanks to those working hard to save our lives.

ACTION: Read "The POZ 100: Accelerating the End of AIDS." Then, pick a few of the astounding people on the list and let them know via email, Twitter or Facebook how much you appreciate their efforts. Heck, why not send them a holiday card?

3. **Support the removal of international travel bans for people with HIV/AIDS.**

The U.S. lifted their ban recently but 45 nations still impose restrictions on people with HIV desiring admission to their country. GBC Health, in collaboration with UNAIDS, secured the signatures of 45 CEOs--one for each country with a ban--to show solidarity about the removal of travel restrictions for people with HIV/AIDS.

ACTION: Read the Op-Ed by Chip Bergh, President and CEO of Levi Strauss & Co and Kenneth Cole, CEO of Kenneth Cole Productions. Then, send a tweet to @GBCHealth and @UNAIDS expressing your appreciation of the CEOs' willingness to stand up for the human rights of people with HIV. GBC Health will ensure the CEOs see your tweets!

4. **Become a black belt on the facts**.

Educating yourself is an empowering and necessary part of being an effective member of the fight against AIDS.

ACTION: Digest these four critical reports. They are required reading for anyone serious about stopping viral spread. Get in a comfy chair--because some are long. All are worthy of your time.

- AmfAR/AVAC: “Action Agenda to End AIDS”

- AVAC: “Achieving the End: One Year and Counting”

- The ONE Campaign: “The Beginning of the End?”

- The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS): “Results”

5. **Join the next generation of cure hunters**.

Gen-whatever-they-call-young-people-now is an essential element of bringing the firepower we need to stop AIDS. As amfAR board member, I am particularly impressed with the zesty leaders of generationCure--a new endeavor designed to engage new people in the permanent medical solutions to HIV infection, a.k.a., da cure.

ACTION: Support young people focused on finding a cure by getting involved in amfAR’s “generationCure” initiative.

6. **Learn how to apply the lessons of early AIDS actvism to today.**

The lessons of past successes are invaluable for today’s challenges. The activists who helped save the lives of all living with HIV today got many things right. As we push for the end of AIDS, and fight for other types of related social change, it’s helpful to study what has worked so we’re even better at fighting today.

ACTION: Watch the award-winning documentary “How to Survive a Plague” (hanky alert!) then check out the film’s guide to becoming involved in social change and join the “How to Survive a Plague” Google+ Hangout Monday, Dec. 3 at 8 p.m. EST. The hangout includes filmmaker David France, legendary activist and AIDSmeds founder Peter Staley, Angelique Kidjo and others! I am hosting. Tweet us some juicy questions! And join us in studio if you’re in NYC.

7. **Be inspired by great minds.**

There are too many wonderful blogs on AIDS on this World AIDS Day to highlight them all...but these are two of my favorites from two really heavy hitters.

ACTION: Read:

- Archbishop Desmond Tutu on the PEPFAR Blueprint

- Former U.S. Assistant Surgeon General, Rear Admiral Susan Blumenthal, MD on ending AIDS

8. **Get tested for HIV.**

It’s essential for each of us to know our status and to continue to check it. Let’s make knowing--and sharing--our status a matter of personal pride. I am not ashamed to have HIV or admit that I do. When more of us know our status and feel comfortable making testing a routine part of

conversations and healthcare, we'll have a better shot at ending AIDS.

ACTION: Get yourself tested or if you already know your current HIV status, take a friend. **Find out where and how to get an AIDS test in the U.S. here.**

9. **Call on President Obama and Congress to fund the end of AIDS.**

It's not up to America alone to end AIDS. Other nations must get more skin in the AIDS game. But since what America chooses to do about its commitment to funding AIDS heavily influences global giving, we need to encourage our leadership to step up, not step down, foreign aid for AIDS. And, impress upon them that we should also lead by example at home. 750,000 Americans with HIV not in care does not engender great confidence that we know how to end AIDS. The Affordable Care Act will help resolve that so we must support its implementation and pressure state leadership to adopt Medicaid expansion.

ACTION: **Read the "PEPFAR Blueprint: Creating an AIDS-free Generation."** Then, ask our nation's leaders to do their part to fund its implementation. Tweet: ".@BarackObama fund the @PEPFAR Blueprint. Increase foreign aid in FY2013/2014." Don't forget to start your tweet with a "." before the "@" symbol. Send the same thing to your representatives in Congress. While we're at it, let's email every member of Congress a copy of the PEPFAR Blueprint. And a note documenting how many of their constituents are struggling to access care for HIV on American shores.

10. **Support the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.**

As part of encouraging more widespread participation in the global pandemic, we must target the leaders of nations capable of contributing more to the end of AIDS to do so. @BillGates tweeted today "One of the best ways to support the fight against #AIDS is to donate to @GlobalFundNews." Indeed.

ACTION: As we head into the next 3-year replenishment cycle for the Global Fund, we must lobby hard to have more nations support The Global Fund. Check out the Global Fund's "Big Push" campaign involving Arianna Huffington, Bono, President Clinton and Tony Blair. Send a link to "Big Push" to Congress and tweet about it using #bigpush. And innovative financial solutions like the "financial transaction tax" are gathering steam around the world as mechanisms for generating more funding from the private sector to protect global health. So get behind creative streams of new money, too.

11. **Ask the World Bank to refocus on ending AIDS**

The World Bank focuses on righting a host of ills. Since so much attention has been given to HIV/AIDS by others, the World Bank of late has focused less on the AIDS pandemic. But its new leader, Jim Kim, has a long history of battling HIV and is a member of the President's Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS (PACHA). Here's hoping he re-engages the fund to help accelerate the end of AIDS.

ACTION: Read World Bank head Jim Kim's thoughts on the PEPFAR Blueprint to reach an AIDS-free generation. Then, tweet him @WorldBank and ask him to redouble their efforts. While you're at it, ask him (and the whole of PACHA) to encourage @BarackObama to make helping ending AIDS--at home and abroad--a second-term priority.

12. Be a part of the AIDS EndGame.

In Shakespearean drama, ACT V is the final act--the act when resolution and redemption occur. In terms of the HIV pandemic, ACT V is how we help bring the final curtain down on AIDS. ACT V: The End of AIDS (a new org run by Leigh Blake of Red Hot and Keep A Child Alive fame and global activist extraordinaire Dr. Paul Zeitz) is launching a massive social engagement campaign called EndGame you will not want to miss (trust me on this one, I'm working with them).

ACTION: Go to ACT V to be kept in the loop. And text "actfive" to 80077 to donate to the AIDS EndGame. Your donations will help support The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

The bottom line? We can, and therefore must, end AIDS. With your help, we will get sooner to a World AIDS Day on which we can celebrate an AIDS-free generation and, ultimately, the end of AIDS.

I always reflect on this day how important the mission of ending AIDS is to me. I also allow myself to acknowledge how emotionally hard and tiring it can sometimes be. But two things keep me going. One is a notion that was shared with me two years ago, when I was paralyzed with nerves thinking of having to speak in front of 35,000 people in Vienna at the Life Ball. As I stood shaking backstage, my dear friend Avram Finkelstein said to me: "Do it for the dead." Somehow, concentrating on the fact that I am still lucky enough to be here helped me galvanize enough courage to walk out on that stage.

The other thing that fuels my fight is the thought that the only way we can ever counterbalance the pain of past losses is to get things right going forward. And to die trying.

Thank you to all of you for all you do for people with HIV. And thanks to so many of you for your personal support over the years. I just realized that this year, I want to add a third driver to my impetus: doing it for the living. Because that captures the essence of where we are today. Refusing to give up now means we have the chance to spare tens of millions of lives. And who among us wouldn't seize that chance?

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She is the author of "I Have Something To Tell You," published by Simon and Schuster.

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