Revolution of Hope

November 12, 2011 By David Ernesto Munar

Good morning USCA. And welcome to my hometown! On behalf of the entire Host Committee, we are thrilled you're here and proud to let you know what Chicago is all about.

Chicagoans are a roll-up-your-sleeves kinda people. We don't buckle under extreme heat, arctic winds or snow. You're in the City that Works - the City of Big Shoulders. I hope the hearty character of Chicago rubs off on you this week because as AIDS advocates, we have some heavy lifting to do. My friends, it's time to get our hands dirty.

Let's face it -- our best efforts against the epidemic are stuck in the mud. The speed of new infections remains unchanged. Too many people with HIV don't know it. And among those of us who are aware of our diagnosis, too many are gripped by shame and fear to seek lifesaving services. And disparities widen everyday among gay men, adolescents, women and trans folks.

Sadly, what we see today is a growing viral underclass - their needs are far greater and more complex than just HIV. The crisis is pronounced in communities of color, our poor neighborhoods, our jails and prisons and among those who roam the streets without a place to call home.

The great tragedy in all of this is that we now have the tools and scientific know-how to stop AIDS in its tracks. Where once HIV was a certain death sentence, ending the pandemic is now technologically possible.

With expanded medical care, essential services, and treatment - among other strategies such as the protection of human rights - we can save the lives of people with HIV and simultaneously reduce the risk of transmission - in some cases by as much as 96%. Combined with other promising advances, a revolution of hope fighting AIDS has dawned.

But with our nation's uncertain political and economic climate, sustained progress is in peril.

At stake is whether we march forward as a society to begin to end AIDS. Or whether we face a diminished government respo

nse that squanders the many promises, the plans, the unrealized potential.

These are not hypothetical scenarios. The fierce deficit-reduction debates in Washington threaten progress on AIDS.

In just two week, the 12-person congressional Super Committee is tasked with recommending $1.5 trillion in federal

Failure by the committee to reach agreement--or failure by Congress to enact their recommendations--will trigger $1.2 trillion in automatic, across-the-board spending cuts. These cuts will affect virtual every federal program we care about.

We need Super Committee members to carefully weigh their options and safeguard funding for the domestic and global AIDS fight. Without expanded investments, the end of AIDS will not draw near - in fact, it will only fade farther away.

Will the US strive for an AIDS-free generation as envisioned by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in her powerful address at the National Institutes of Health? Or will our policies condemn entire communities to generational HIV and other socio-economic woes?

From now until Thanksgiving, the six House members and six Senators who comprise the Super Committee are best poised to answer these questions. We need your help to send these elected officials an unequivocal message: don't reduce the deficit on the backs of people affected by AIDS.

This morning volunteers are circulating with petitions that need your signature. Please sign one and return it to a volunteer and we'll make sure they get to the appropriate offices.

But don't stop there and don't be lulled into any false sense of security. You will need to mobilize your clients, your board members, your donors, your networks and media contacts like never before - ending AIDS is truly too important to fail.

And it doesn't end with the Super Committee.

We must fight for fully implemented and fully funded health care reform. Fight to protect Medicaid and Medicare; fight to end ADAP waiting lists; and fight to secure an extension for Ryan White. We need evidence-based prevention services funded across the country, legal reform to confront stigma-producing criminalization laws, and increases for global AIDS programs, including PEPFAR and the Global Fund.

This will require much more of us. Put plainly, if you're not actively advocating on an array of these issues, you're simply not on board with the goal of ending AIDS.

I think many of us in this room identify with the rallying cry of Occupy Wall Street. Somehow I suspect we all here are among the 99%.

Not to confuse matters, but I also invite you to be part of an equally power movement aimed at promoting the 96%. News this year that treatment is prevention is a clarion call to raise our voices powerfully - and even obnoxiously if we have to - so our ethical and moral message for immediate AIDS action is heard loud and clear.

We are compelled to court a path to begin to end AIDS, because the science is lighting the way. It's the humane, just, and righteous thing to do. It even makes good economic sense. We will not turn our backs on those whose lives depend on our advocacy. We will rally, agitate, educate, campaign, and yes, even vote our conscience.

In 2011 and 2012, our country faces several deciding moments about the values we hold dear as Americans. And for HIV/AIDS, the stakes could not be higher. This all reminded me of a favorite poem, A Dream Deferred by Langston Hughes:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore--
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over--
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Ending AIDS must not be our dream deferred, and with your help we can mobilize even greater support for the 96%.

Enjoy your time here in Chicago. Thank you!

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