

Dear Member of Congress _____:

We, the undersigned constituents concerned about the global AIDS pandemic, are writing to urge your support for US global AIDS programs that target the most vulnerable and marginalized populations, including the millions of injection drug users who make up a third of the world's HIV infections outside of sub-Saharan Africa. Despite the urgent need, fewer than 5 % of drug injectors receive any kind of exposure to HIV prevention. In many countries, effective, humane addiction treatment is rare. Moreover, only a very few of those infected via drug injection are receiving treatment with AIDS drugs.

We ask that US policies promote rapid expansion of the most effective, evidence-based HIV prevention methods for drug injectors and respect the human rights and dignity of this highly disenfranchised population. These include accessible addiction treatment (including medication-assisted therapy for heroin addicts), access to sterile syringes, outreach and risk reduction education, and promotion of sexual risk reduction and condom use. *These measures are needed simultaneously to stem the spread of HIV/AIDS among this marginalized population.*

Consider the following alarming statistics:

- A World Health Organization (WHO) report estimates there are 8.6 million people living with HIV in Asia, 960,000 of whom **were infected in the past year**. Close to half of the people Asia living with HIV were infected through injection drug use.
- In Vietnam, **the number of people living with HIV doubled** in recent years, as the numbers of heroin injectors dramatically increased. Official estimates are that 260,000 people in Vietnam were living with HIV in 2005, and the majority of those HIV were among injecting drug users. In Vietnam 63% of those infected are under 30, and in Thailand, 50-60% are under 24 years of age.
- Eastern Europe and central Asia have nearly half a million HIV-infected youth, mostly as a result of injection drug use. Rates are rising rapidly in Belarus, Kazakhstan, Latvia, and Russia, as well as in the Ukraine, where one percent of young women and two percent of young men are now HIV-infected.

HIV prevention strategies for injection drug users are straightforward, and their effectiveness is well established. Extensive research has also confirmed that they are cost-effective and do not increase drug use.

In 2002, WHO commissioned a study of HIV prevalence in 103 cities in 24 countries. **In 36 cities with needle exchange programs, HIV prevalence decreased by 18.6% annually, while in 67 cities without needle exchange programs, HIV prevalence increased by 8.1% annually.**ⁱ Research has established that needle exchange programs do not increase drug use, negatively impact addiction treatment, or increase the amount of injecting equipment on the street.

We strongly urge you to support humane measures to protect this vulnerable population and stop the spread of global HIV/AIDS.

ⁱ Gibson DR, Flynn NM and Perales D. "Effectiveness of syringe exchange programs in reducing HIV risk behavior and HIV seroconversion among injecting drug users." *AIDS* 2001; 15(11); 1329-1341.

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